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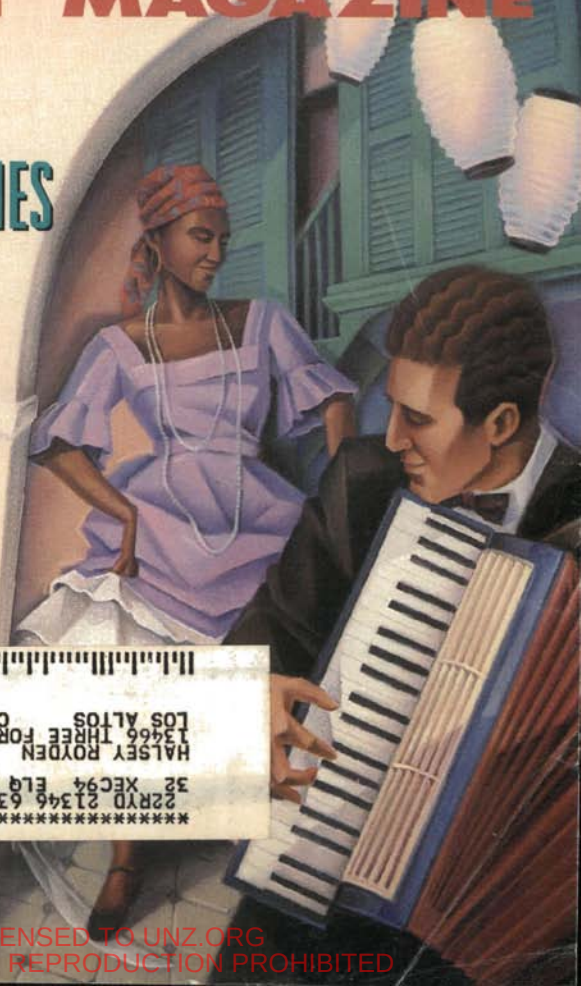

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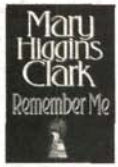

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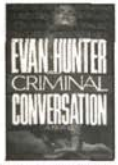

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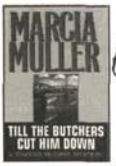

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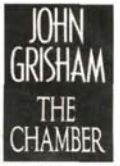

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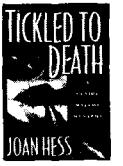

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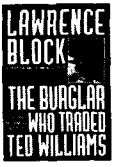

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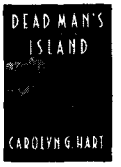

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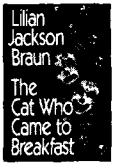

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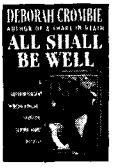

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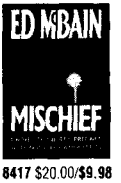

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CULTURE CLASH

by MICHAEL COLLINS

Douglas firs grow thick down the final slopes of the coast mountains to the cliffs above the sea, and the cliffs plunge down to where the last rocks of the continent meet the surf of the Pacific Rim. The land is rock, and the wind cuts to the bone. It's a rugged coast at the edge of northern Mendocino County, where even the gulls have to fight the wind, their cries the only living sound. I hadn't driven this coast in a long time, and I wished I wasn't driving it now. I'm too old to be thrilled by the harsh realities of raw nature. Or maybe I've been in Southern California too long.

Sandy Ciaccio knew me from New York before she came west to Spanish Cliffs in Mendocino County to paint the rugged coast, and she tracked me down in Santa Barbara. "I don't know what really happened, Dan, but I do know that Setsuko isn't sick or crazy."

Her call came into my office at the rear of our hacienda in Summerland on a sunny Thursday in February. A friend of hers, a painter in the Japanese style and wife of a real-estate tycoon, had been found stabbed and unconscious in the family den beside her two dead children. Now she was barely alive and in a coma in the hospital. The weapon was a sixteenth-century samurai short sword. (Sandy used the proper Japanese term: *Wakizashi.*) With the longer *katana,* the sword was one of a pair her husband had on display in an alcove in the living room. At first the police assumed the attacker had been an intruder. Then they announced that Setsuko Owada had murdered her two children and tried to kill herself. They concluded that she had gone insane.

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"But she's not insane, Dan. There has to be something we don't know."

"And you want me to find out what?"

"That's what I want, and I can pay you."

"The art business is booming?"

"I'm cleaning up. Name your price."

And so I was driving along the wild northern Mendocino coast to find out why the local police were so sure Setsuko Takeda Owada was crazy.

"Easy, Mr. Fortune," Sergeant Tallich said, "there's no other reason, motive, or explanation."

The sheriff's detective was a compact man in a neat dark-blue suit and regimental tie. He readily agreed to see me, waved me to a chair, studied my empty left sleeve, then leaned back and shook his head. "We eliminated everything we could think of except that she intended a double-murder and suicide, and we don't have any possible motive for that. Whether she or anyone else knew it or not, she's mentally ill and unstable. Her mind just blew. Pow!" He snapped his fingers, then looked out his window at trees and blowing sky. "It happens."

"It happens," I said, "but there's usually a reason, a trigger for a hidden illness."

"Okay, there's usually a trigger. But we can't find one. She's going to have to tell us what it was when she wakes up, if she ever does, or it dies with her."

"Murder-suicide while of unsound mind, case closed?"

"I can guarantee it."

"How?"

Tallich leaned forward, opened the file on his desk. "The first thing we suspected was a nut, some crazy intruder. It had rained hard all that day, there were no footprints, tire tracks, or any other marks around the house. No broken windows or doors, no signs of entry. Then we considered the husband, it was his damned sword. Only he was down in San Francisco that whole day, witnesses saw him leave on the plane, he was with people all day in San Francisco, and he was there when we called to tell him his housekeeper had found them. And there isn't a single person who knows her, and that includes her husband and your client, who can give us any reason for her to kill those kids and herself except that she lost her marbles and went ape."

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"Someone was hiding in the house."

"And got out how?"

"After you arrived, in the confusion."

"There wasn't any confusion, we had men on all the doors and windows, and, again, no marks anywhere except ours. And he didn't slip out disguised as a deputy. We're a small office, we know all our officers. Oh, and I forgot to mention two other facts. Only her prints were on the weapon, and the den door and windows were locked on the inside."

Now he smiled.

"How'd the housekeeper find them?"

"Knocked, got no answer, tried the door, then went out and looked in through the window."

That was when I left his office.

Sandy Ciaccio is tall, thin, and angular, and she's a fine painter of expressionist landscapes that reflect the grandeur and hard war of land and water on the rocky coast where she has chosen to live. She is, despite her last name, a dark blonde. Ciaccio was a long-forgotten husband. She's really a Scot. A stubborn Scot.

"I don't give one damn how it looks, Dan, she wasn't and isn't crazy. Hidden or otherwise."

"She killed her kids, Sandy, and tried to kill herself."

"I'm not saying she didn't. I'm saying there's more to it. If she did what they say she did, then she believed it was what she had to do, that she had no choice."

"Such as what?"

"I don't know!" Sandy got up from the couch where we were sitting, walked to the wall of windows that enclosed the living room in the one-bedroom cabin she had built at the edge of a cliff above the violent sea. "Setsuko comes from a samurai family that goes back fourteen generations. In the sixteenth-century wars they were almost the shoguns. She would do what she had to. She's neither weak, stupid, confused, nor insane."

"Then tell me where to look. Where do I start?"

"Hey." She turned from the window. "You're the detective. You tell me. Where would you start?"

It's not a large cabin—living room, studio, tiny kitchen, and small bedroom. The living room and studio make up ninety percent of the cabin, with glass on every side and overhead. It was all she, or in her view anyone else, needed.

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"The husband," I said. "Tell me about him."

"Hideki Owada, rich, smart, ruthless. Another samurai family, only they served a lord who always guessed wrong in the old wars so they had a rocky road over the centuries and Hideki is even more touchy and proud. I'm surprised he's going along with the insanity idea for a second."

"How'd he make his money?"

"Real estate. He started when the old ancestral lands in the west-coast snow country of Japan got valuable, then moved on into Kyoto and Tokyo. Finally he branched out to the States, and last year bought our famous local golf club, Spanish Cliffs. An old lumber baron's mansion went with it, and they live there."

"What does Setsuko do outside the house? Who are her friends besides you?"

"Nothing and no one."

"You said she painted. You're her friend."

"Her painting is *all* her outside activities, and that's done mostly at home on the golf-course property. And I wouldn't say I was a friend exactly."

"What are you?"

"Someone who meets her maybe once a week because we like to paint the same view. Like Cezanne and Hokusai, we both make hundreds of sketches at the same spot on the coast in different lights and conditions. The spot happens to be on Spanish Cliffs property. We rarely speak, and when we do it's mostly about painting. I never see her anywhere else."

I walked to the window and the view of the wild and austere coast below. "How do you know so much about her, Sandy?"

"I found out everything I could about her and her husband." She came to stand beside me. "She never appears in public outside that house. In fact, except for her painting, and our chance meetings, she never seems to have gone anywhere or done anything around here."

"Her husband must go to functions, he has to give parties."

"She's the hostess at his parties at home, he goes alone to anything outside." She looked at me. "She's a virtual recluse, if not a prisoner. Dan, there's something wrong in that house, and it's not her mind."

"Yeah," I said, "and I can tell you what it is. Culture clash. You're describing the life of an old-fashioned Japanese samurai wife, and that's all. In the past, a samurai never even admitted he was mar-

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ried. His wife was 'the person from the north,' the direction where sneak attacks came from."

"Then maybe culture clash is where you better look for why her children are dead and she almost is."

As I said, Sandy Ciaccio's stubborn.

"Oyaku shinju."

His name is Harry: Professor of Asian History Harold Smith of the University of California at Santa Barbara. He's lived half his life in Japan. He's also a mean poker player. He's always in his office early the day of our weekly game, so I'd called him from Sandy's living-room couch, where I'd spent the night with the surf pounding below, and told him the whole story.

"What the hell's *oyaku shinju?"*

"Very good," he said, "you got it right the first time."

"I'm talented. Now what is it?"

"Parent-child suicide," Harry explained from Santa Barbara. "It's illegal now in Japan, but it's considered an honorable way to die, and is still fairly common. Maybe three hundred or so cases a year. Traditional Japanese consider children an extension of their parents, together they form one unit. In the traditional Japanese mind, when a parent commits suicide it's more merciful to take the children along in death than to leave them behind."

"So what happens if the parent survives and the kids don't?"

"The parent can be charged with murder, but it almost never happens. A mother in particular is rarely punished. She's considered an unfortunate victim of circumstances."

"Why would a mother do it, Harry?"

"Intense suffering, an impossible situation. For a samurai type like your Setsuko Owada, an unbearable loss of honor would do it. An honorable way to solve an intolerable problem."

"How would our police and courts act towards it?"

At the other end Harry snorted, "Badly, I'd expect. You see it a lot these days. Korean refugees kill dogs for dinner, the Humane Society screams for the police. Cubans sacrifice chickens in religious rites, they get arrested. A Hmong steals a bride in traditional courting ritual, he's charged with kidnapping and rape. On it goes. Culture clash, Dan."

"I guess it could work the other way too. The foreigner not understanding our ways."

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"Every day," Harry agreed. "That all, Dan? We'll miss you at the game tonight."

"You'll miss my money," I said, and asked the question I had a hunch I didn't really need to. "What's the usual trigger for a Japanese wife to commit *oyaku shinju?*"

"Could be many reasons, but I'd say most common would be adultery by the husband. Especially for a wife from an old samurai family."

The lumber baron's mansion was an ornate three-story Victorian of carved gingerbread with towers and turrets, gables and balconies.

A lean man in his late fifties, not much under six feet, Hideki Owada met me at the door with a stiff bow, and led me through a half-Western, half-Japanese living room to the den. He sat behind a desk in the room where his wife and children had been slashed with his own *wakizashi.* He was tall for a Japanese, and as expressionless as a Connecticut Yankee. His eyebrows, eyes, and mouth formed three narrow parallel slashes on a hard face, except that the final slash of the mouth curved slightly downward.

"You wish to speak of my wife, Mr. Fortune?" His eyes never even flickered toward my missing arm.

"I expect a lot of people have spoken to you about your wife, Mr. Owada."

"Americans have a fascination with violence, death."

"Japanese don't?"

"For us death is another part of life, a private matter."

"Even *oyaku shinju?*"

The parallel lines on his stern face became thinner, but he said nothing.

"Why didn't you tell the police it was *oyaku shinju?*"

"Because I would lose honor at home."

"And lose business?"

"Yes."

"And that's more important than your wife's honor? Better to let the world think she's insane?"

"My wife is insane," Owada said. "She must be."

"Why?"

"Because *oyaku shinju* is not possible."

I knew what he was telling me, but I asked anyway. "You're not having an affair? Seeing another woman?"

"My wife has not been dishonored."

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"I can find out, Mr. Owada, believe me."

He bowed slightly. "In Japan, the word of an Owada would be sufficient. But investigate as you wish, Mr. Fortune."

"There are other reasons for *oyaku shinju.*"

"My wife is a Takeda, only I could dishonor her enough."

We sat in silence for a time. The old mansion wasn't as close to the cliffs as Sandy's cabin, but close enough to hear the distant pound of the waves on the rocks, and feel the wind that with the cliffs and surf makes Spanish Cliffs the spectacular and world-famous golf course it is.

I said, "Then maybe she thought she had a reason."

"How could she think what has no basis?"

I stood. "Does she have a room of her own?"

"She has a studio for her painting."

"Okay if I look around it?"

It was a large room with a northern skylight, sunny and warm even on these days of cutting winds. Setsuko Owada's paintings were Japanese, yet they weren't classical and they weren't delicate. There was a modern Western influence, and the rocks and cliffs, clouds and winds, fogs and storms, were harsh and powerful. The room was spartan. A single narrow cot could have been in the garret of any struggling Western artist. The only other furniture was a wooden table full of paints, and a straight chair. The room of someone who would do what had to be done.

The notebook was in the table drawer. It was filled with notes and sketches of the views and scenery from many parts of Spanish Cliffs, comments on paintings, records of conversations with other painters, especially Sandy, all apparently taking place at spots where she and the others painted. It was written in English.

"My wife is well educated," Owada said.

"The university? Away from Japan?"

"Privately, in her father's home."

"But she does everything in English?"

"It is my wish while we live here. Even when we are alone."

"But a private notebook?"

"To do otherwise would dishonor me."

I looked at the notebook again, read the last few pages. There was nothing personal or gossipy, all strictly about painting, until I found the woman's name. A single name, written down, underlined. Written down again. And again. It was in the book twelve times.

"Emily Foster," I read to Owada. "You know the name?"

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"She is a local woman I must do business with."

"At her house?"

"Yes. She often prefers to do business in her home office."

"Has she been here to your house?"

"Yes. At parties." His eyes did flicker now. "Sometimes alone. On business."

"Does she flirt? A brash woman, very forward?"

Owada said nothing.

I said, "Your wife wrote this woman's name in her painting notebook too many times. If Emily Foster isn't a painter, I wonder why?"

Sergeant Tallich said, "Not a whisper, Fortune. As far as we can find out, Mr. Owada's as pure as the snow. No scandal, not even a hint, and around here now even a hint would be used as an excuse to run him out of the town and the country."

"Why?"

"He's pushing a business deal that's got the locals pretty damned annoyed."

"What kind of deal?"

"Something to do with Spanish Cliffs and a club. I don't play golf, don't know the details."

"Would Emily Foster know the details?"

"I expect she might."

"Could it have had anything to do with what Setsuko Owada did, Sergeant?"

"How?" Tallich shrugged. "She cut her kids' throats, stabbed herself. If she did that over some business deal of Owada's, she's even crazier than we think."

Emily Foster turned out to be Mrs. Courtney W. Foster IV of 14 Cliff View Drive—a house not quite as big as Buckingham Palace in a gated community cheek to jowl with the Spanish Cliffs Golf Club. In fact, Hideki Owada's lumber baron's mansion was in clear sight through a high fence.

Mrs. Foster received me in the sun room. In her early forties, not tall and no more than 110 pounds, she radiated confidence. With short red hair, she wasn't beautiful, but she wasn't ugly. She was sitting in a white wicker lounge chair with a book and a bottle of white wine in an ice bucket, and she saw my empty sleeve. She shivered as if she'd touched something unclean. Then her good man-

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ners took over. Or maybe it was compassion. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt.

"It must be a horrible tragedy for you, Mr. Fortune, I'm so sorry. Was it Vietnam?"

"Another war. No need to be sorry, it was only indirectly your mother and father's fault."

That confused her. She didn't know if I was insulting her parents, excusing them for something she didn't understand, or making fun of her. She didn't like being confused, so changed the subject. "What possible interest could a private detective have in me? Or in Spanish Cliffs, for that matter?"

"That depends on why your name is in Setsuko Owada's sketchbook about a dozen times, Mrs. Foster."

"My name?" She had no confusion over that question and all its implications. "May I ask who hired you, and exactly why? I was under the impression that tragic matter was settled."

"A friend of Mrs. Owada's doesn't think so."

Her green eyes studied me more carefully. A careful, analytical stare. I suddenly realized Mrs. Courtney Foster was a heavy hitter, an important woman in the community.

"I didn't know Mr. Owada had a friend left in town, and the wife doesn't leave that house enough to make any."

"Sandy Ciaccio."

"The painter? How did they—?"

"Setsuko painted too. They met on the cliffs."

"Surprises never end." She still studied me as if trying to assess exactly how important this all was to her. "But I have no idea why my name is in her sketchbook."

"You don't know her well?"

"I met her twice, both times at Owada's house, and the only words she spoke were 'hello' and 'goodbye.' No one here knows Mrs. Owada."

"How about Mr. Owada? You know him very well, Mrs. Foster?"

I put an obvious insinuating emphasis into my voice and she didn't miss it. The compassion for my missing arm, if it had been that, vanished. The green eyes turned to stone.

"I think that is your last question unless you want to be sued for slander."

Threats make me push harder. "No affair with Hideki, Emily? You're above that sort of thing?"

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Coldly: "If I were to indulge in an affair, Mr. Fortune, it wouldn't be with a Jap, and certainly not with one who wants to sell our American rights to his countrymen."

"You dislike the Japanese, Mrs. Foster?"

"I like them in Japan. I don't like them in my backyard and certainly not in my bedroom." She shivered delicately. A Jap was as bad as a cripple. "Now—"

"Selling our American rights? Is that the business deal the community is against?"

"Yes. Now, if you—"

"Are you involved in this deal?"

"You could say that."

"Financially?"

"Politically," she said. "Sergeant Tallich forgot to tell you I'm a county supervisor. Mr. Owada's plan is up before the Board of Supervisors for approval. Without that approval his project will never get off the ground."

"Do I take that as meaning you intend to vote against the plan, whatever it is?"

"You can take it any way you like. My vote is, of course, confidential until our next meeting. As for what it is, that's quite simple. Owada bought the Spanish Cliffs complex about a year ago for a great deal of money. Far too much, as it turns out. The income from the hotels and golf courses can't pay off the interest on the debt he acquired. Whether or not Owada knew that in advance, and planned all along to use the threat of his company's insolvency as a lever to get our approval for this proposed project, is one of our questions. Whatever the truth of that, he is using the problem to justify selling memberships in the golf courses for as much as seven hundred thousand dollars each to solve his cash problem."

"Are there enough buyers for something like that?"

"Oh, there'll be plenty of buyers, Mr. Fortune. However, that's not the county's concern. What does concern us is that the club members would get exclusive preferential treatment on what is, after all, the county's coastline. There is a serious problem of public access."

"To a private golf course?"

"To a part of our public coastline."

She was a good politician, nothing much showed on her face.

"Just how serious is this threat to 'public access' being taken in the community, Mrs. Foster?"

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"That would depend on who you talk to."

"Anyone you know taking it particularly seriously?"

"Not that I can think of," she said. She poured herself another glass of the white wine. She didn't offer me a glass. "You're suggesting a connection between what happened to Mrs. Owada and her children, and Owada's business proposal?"

"It's the first hint of a motive I've had."

"Except the real one: She was unbalanced and her mind snapped."

"With no previous record of mental instability whatsoever."

"She intended to commit a murder-suicide, Mr. Fortune."

"She tried to commit a known Japanese ritual murder-suicide: *oyaku shinju.*"

Emily Foster drank her wine. "Does that make some kind of difference?"

"It does to the Japanese."

"We're not in Japan. Their barbarous customs don't especially interest me." She put her glass down, looked me in the eye. "If there's nothing else?"

I was getting a strong hunch there was very much something else, but it was still too much only a hunch to talk about to Emily Foster.

Hideki Owada was working in his garden.

"When I am tense, Mr. Fortune, I find working in the garden can bring much peace."

"What do you think of your chances of pushing through your club membership idea?"

"I am optimistic."

"You know there's a lot of opposition."

"I am confident they will understand my problem and see the long-range potential for the community."

"You mean the supervisors?"

"Yes."

"How about the rest of the community? The short range?"

Owada said nothing, continued to dig at a particularly stubborn weed.

I said, "Prejudice and insularity are one thing, but not enough to commit what could be essentially murder. That would take something more important, more crucial. Like money."

"Murder?" Owada sat back on his heels, looked up at me. It was a look I expect the enemy saw on many hard samurai faces in six-

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teenth-century Japan. "In Japan, my wife would not be charged with—"

"I'm not talking about your wife," I said.

His face went behind an invisible wall. "You are talking about what, Mr. Fortune?"

"Call it a hunch," I said. "Can you think of anyone your club could cause to lose a lot of money?"

Sitting on his heels in his garden, he thought for some time. "There are many who perceive they will lose, but that is because they do not see the large opportunities of the future."

"How about someone who doesn't think he'll survive to the long run?"

He shrugged. "I cannot say."

Sandy Ciaccio said, "Half the community is against Owada's plan, Dan, although I'm not sure why. Is it important?"

"I've got a hunch about what happened to Setsuko Owada, and Owada's club project is the only possible motive. I need a suspect who isn't just against Owada, or even violently against. I need someone who could lose a short-range fortune. Someone who could go down the tubes if Owada gets his club."

We were sitting again in her one-bedroom cabin at the edge of the cliff above the sea. In the large room with more glass than wood or furniture. Sandy believed in open space, bringing the outdoors inside. At the moment the outdoors was gray becoming black, with the wind blowing hard and the gulls fighting to stay in one place above the cliffs.

"I can't imagine how the club would do that to anyone. Nothing would really change."

"Okay," I said, "let's narrow it. What does Owada's plan do? Basically, it sells the course to the rich who can afford to pay seven hundred thousand, plus yearly fees and assessments, for a lifetime of playing golf on a great course. According to Emily Foster, the problem is that that will give them exclusive preferential treatment on what is the county's coastline, and limit public access. What access to the coastline on Spanish Cliffs Golf Club does the public have now?"

"It's open to anyone who wants to play golf, or stay at the hotel."

"What else?"

"As far as I know, that's it. It's fenced and gated. There's no way in without paying, and no reason to go in except to play golf."

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"No public beaches? No public pool? No fishing? No camping? No RV parking?"

"The hotel has a pool and riding paths, but they're for hotel guests only."

"For how much?"

"Three hundred and fifty a night to start."

"And the golf course?"

"One round costs two hundred dollars, and I hear the best tee-off times are booked months in advance by locals and regulars from as far away as Los Angeles."

"So when Emily Foster says 'public access,' what she really means by the public are people who can afford two hundred dollars to play a few hours of golf, and pay three fifty a night for a room."

"I guess that's it."

I looked out through her walls of glass at the black sky and gale winds of the rugged coast and thought about public access at $200 a round. And a private golf-and-hotel-club at $700,000 down and yearly fees. What would those club members get? What would club membership mean?

It was then I remembered what Emily Foster had said about the *Japs* belonging in Japan, knew what the objection to Hideki Owada's proposed club was, and what trouble it could cause some local businessman.

"Americans don't buy high-priced memberships in golf clubs, Sandy. The Japanese do. They have the money and the love of golf. And the club members would always come first. That's what no one wants to happen." I could see it as clearly as the violent wind blowing the gulls out there through the wall of glass. "Owada is selling first crack at everything at Spanish Cliffs, including the restaurant and all the best tee times. Americans would be lining up behind the 'Japs' to hit a ball at Spanish Cliffs, if they got the chance at all." I looked at Sandy across the spartan living room. "That's the 'public access' they want to preserve; the rights of two-hundred-dollars-a-round American golfers over seven-hundred-thousand-dollar membership Japanese golfers."

She was silent for a time. "But what does that have to do with Setsuko committing *oyaku shinju?*"

"I think someone counted on her doing it, Sandy, set her up to do it."

"How could anyone do that, for God's sake?"

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"By telling her Owada was having an affair and giving the name of a woman he met with often—in her own home and in his. A woman Owada spent a lot of time with, often at her house. A woman who was bold, brazen, forward, and familiar around Owada. Like a whore in Setsuko's eyes. A geisha."

"That would be murder, Dan."

"At least accessory before the fact."

Her silence was longer this time. "Because he was going to lose money if the club deal went through?"

"The American way," I said. I stood and began to pace, feeling like those gulls outside battling the murderous wind. "It's going to be hard to prove or even pin down. It could take months even to figure out who had the motive, but I don't think we'll have to."

"You've got a better way?"

I watched the struggling gulls. "Someone in Spanish Cliffs told Setsuko her husband was having an affair with Emily Foster. Whoever it is has to be worried because Setsuko is alive, could regain consciousness at any time, and tell what happened. Let's give him more to worry about."

Sergeant Tallich said, "You're grabbing at straws, Fortune. No one in Spanish Cliffs would do anything that crazy. Hell, it'd never work anyway. The first damn thing she'd do is confront Owada, for Christ's sake."

"That's the last thing she'd do, Sergeant," Sandy said. "It would be too much shame to speak about."

"I think she was already suspicious," I said. "The way Emily Foster acted around Owada. To Setsuko there would have been only one possible explanation—Foster wanted her husband. All she needed was someone to tell her Owada had succumbed, and she assumed the worst. That's why she wrote Foster's name over and over in her book. She was deciding what she had to do."

"She didn't understand American culture," Sandy said.

Tallich was still unconvinced.

"If we're wrong," Sandy said, "Dan's plan can't hurt. If we're right, there's a really sick person around Spanish Cliffs."

I said, "Setsuko could recover consciousness any time and tell us the truth. But it could be too late. If the killer gets to her first."

He didn't like it, but couldn't take the risk. "We'll try it for a week. I probably should have my head examined."

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The local newspaper editor smelled an exclusive even the wire services would pick up and was more than eager to cooperate. We cleared it with Hideki Owada, and the newspaper announced next morning that Setsuko was out of danger and expected to regain full consciousness any day.

Each day we upped the pressure. Setsuko had made another step on the road to full recovery. She was off life-support. She was beginning to respond to questions. She had asked to speak to the sheriff.

It took three days.

He wasn't a killer, not even a criminal. Only a businessman afraid of financial ruin. Inept, feeble, and almost pathetic.

Sandy, staked out at the staff entrance to the hospital, spotted him the moment he arrived—in his own car, dressed in green surgical scrubs under his own tweed topcoat, and wearing common street shoes. Tallich's hidden men tracked him all the way up to Setsuko Owada's room. There was no guard on the door, why would anyone want to harm a poor insane woman? He walked into the room, stood building his courage, then moved stiffly to the bed and reached for a pillow with trembling hands.

He had the pillow over her face, his own face chalk white against the ill-fitting scrubs, when Sergeant Tallich took it away from him. His face turned from white to the green of abject terror as the rest of us walked into the room, then he collapsed into a chair with his head in his hands and his whole body shaking.

"Who?" I said.

"George Chattaway," Sandy said.

Tallich said, "He owns a new upscale multimillion-dollar gated development half a mile from the golf course. The close availability of the course is one of his biggest selling points. I guess he got worried about what might happen if the club went through and the Japanese froze everyone else out."

As we all watched him, George Chattaway looked up at us in the dim room. "It would ruin me. What else could I do?"

It turned out that George Chattaway had lived for two years in Japan, knew all about *oyaku shinju* and ancient samurai families with their excessive sense of honor. He had every penny of his own, and a lot more he'd begged and borrowed, invested in his development, and was so overextended he had to sell the million-dollar houses fast to stay one jump ahead of his creditors. The club would ruin their appeal. Or that was what he thought.

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So he told Setsuko that Owada was having an affair with Emily Foster, knowing she would almost certainly commit *oyaku shinju*. He was sure that shame would make Hideki Owada give up and go home. But if by some chance that didn't happen, then he was equally sure the horror of the barbaric Japanese culture that allowed such a thing would convince the Board of Supervisors to turn down Owada's whole project and save his investment.

The county attorney charged Chattaway with conspiracy to commit murder for the deaths of Setsuko's children. "We may only get accessory, but that'll put him away a long time."

The Board of Supervisors voted three days later. They still turned Owada's club project down flat.

"Public access comes first," Emily Foster told me. She even kept a straight face.

Hideki Owada wasn't all that upset.

"Won't you have to sell out now?"

"We will see what the future brings, Mr. Fortune."

"How can you meet your debt payments without the club?"

His stern face almost smiled. "I will return in a few months with a new proposal. One they will not refuse."

"Like what?"

"Perhaps a development. Three or four hundred fine houses set discreetly around the golf course. Very upscale."

"The supervisors'll never approve—" But I stopped. Of course the supervisors would approve. The houses would be for Americans, not for Japanese, and a businessman had a right to protect his investment. Hideki Owada understood Americans a lot better than his wife.

Setsuko eventually recovered, but remembered little of what had happened. If George Chattaway had been tougher he might have gotten away with it all. But, as I said, he wasn't a killer, only a weak and scared businessman.

Setsuko went to trial. The judge listened to the Japanese experts, said she would suffer enough the rest of her life, and let her off with probation.

She returned to Japan. Perhaps she will find some peace there, some way to come to terms with the deaths of her children, the tragedy of her clash with a foreign culture. ●

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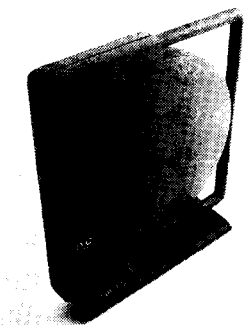

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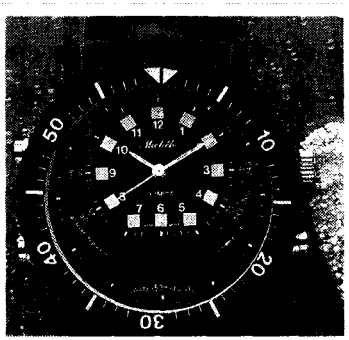

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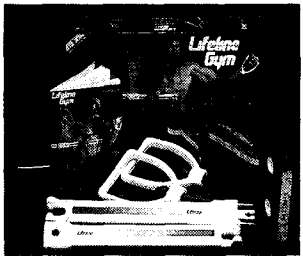

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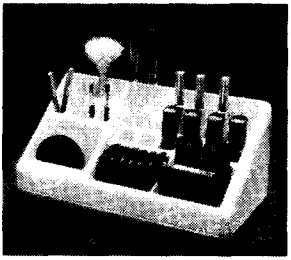

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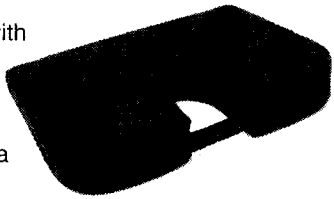

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As a professor of law at St. Louis University, Francis M. Nevins, Jr. sometimes comes across points of law that pertain to his other profession: crime writing. The genesis of this new Loren Mensing story was a desire to share with other writers some facts about copyright law. . . .

NIGHT OF SILKEN SNOW

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, JR.

He sat most of the night in the high-rise suite's bay window, watching soft feathery snow slide down from the black sky and coat the sleeping city in white, trying to ease his anguish with the cool detached thinking of a lawyer. From one perspective, he told himself, the person responsible for all but the first crime was the president of the United States. Or at any rate, whichever political correctness guru had told the president he had to be perceived as reading more books by women: whoever had dreamed up the notion that at the end of the president's evening jog he should casually drop in at a Washington bookshop that just happened to be open late, and should purchase and then offhandedly recommend to the reporters surrounding him a novel, almost any novel, with a female byline.

The presidential pick had been *Slumber Party*, by an unsung author named Margaret Crane. Within a week she was sung to the rafters, within two weeks her book was on every bestseller list, and by month's end her agent had signed a three-million-dollar movie deal with the hottest young director in Hollywood. Ten days after the deal was closed, her husband left her and filed for divorce, and for his equitable share of the windfall. That was the crucial link in the chain of events that hadn't yet ended but had left Loren Mensing sitting alone in a night of silken snow, trying to ease his anguish.

That fall semester he was teaching an evening section twice a week. On those days he would walk the three miles from his condo to school, and after class let out at 9:50 P.M. he would treat himself

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first to a few drinks at the Legal Eagle tavern a block from the University Law Center and then at closing time to a cab home. The bar was all but empty on that raw fall night and he was nursing another bourbon-and-decaf at a corner table with an enlarged still of Gregory Peck from *To Kill a Mockingbird* framed on the wall behind him at right angles to a framed enlargement of John Barrymore from *Counsellor at Law*. He didn't see her until she was standing over him and then he didn't recognize her.

"Was I that forgettable?" she asked in the cool sophisticated tone of the female lead in a romantic comedy film from the thirties. Without waiting for an invitation, she dropped into the chair beside him. Loren struggled to keep befuddlement out of his face as he studied her. Tall, late thirties, curly ash-blond hair, no makeup, wearing designer jeans under her overcoat. . . . She ordered a double Maker's Mark straight up from the exhausted barmaid hovering over her and then Loren remembered.

Five, no six years ago, a bitter cold night in the first week of January. Airports all over the Northeast and Midwest shut down by snow and ice storms. Loren's flight back from the annual meeting of the Association of American Law Schools, along with dozens of other flights from countless starting points and with countless destinations, had been diverted to Chicago. Hundreds of numbed and frustrated travelers were packed like freight in airport vans and hauled through snow-choked access roads to whatever hotels and motels the airlines had made arrangements with. He was standing straddle-legged in the rear of the van when a skid on an ice patch sent her sprawling into him and they helped each other up and began talking. Later they shared a drink in the bar of their motel—Maker's Mark straight up, on her recommendation—and when they decided they were too wired for sleep they went for a post-midnight swim in the heated basement pool. Thanks to the late hour and the fact that most of their fellow strandees either hadn't had swimwear in their luggage or hadn't been traveling with just a carry-on bag, they had the pool to themselves. The motel was built on a hillside and two of the basement walls were sheets of glass. They could float warm and relaxed in the pool and gaze out at huge soft snowflakes sifting down to the silenced earth. After a while the woman had ducked underwater and the next thing Loren saw was her teal-blue maillot flying in an arc to the lip of the pool. Then she streaked away to the deep end and began swimming laps past him, keeping her distance at first as if to test him, then stroking closer

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and closer until she slithered up into his arms and clung to him in a sort of erotic desperation. It was the first time he had made love in water. The rest of the night they had spent in his room. "Just first names," she had said. "I want this to stay magical." What name had she given him? He thought she had called herself Peggy. When he woke at seven in the morning he was alone and his nametag from the law-school conference wasn't in his jacket where he thought he'd put it at the meeting's end. She wasn't on the airport van that shuttled him back to O'Hare an hour later. He never saw her again. Sometimes he wondered if he'd dreamed her.

"The security guard at the law school told me I might find you here after class," she said, and took a healthy sip of her bourbon as if she needed it for courage. "Loren—Professor Mensing—" she tried to hold back a giggle but it slipped out "—it's crazy, we've been lovers but I don't know what to call you—I think I need your help."

"I guess we're beyond just first names then?"

She looked puzzled for a moment before her face cleared. "You mean how did I find out who you were? Well, your picture does get in the papers now and then even in Missouri. And when the media began focusing on me a few months ago I thought of you and—but you *don't* know anything about me except my first name, do you?" She took another sip of Maker's Mark, this time a dainty one. "I am Marnie Crane," she told him.

If Loren had been drinking any of his own laced coffee he would have spluttered it all over himself. The *Slumber Party* woman, propelled to celebrity status by presidential decree! Weren't Peggy and Marnie both diminutives for Margaret? "You don't look much like your picture in *Newsweek,*" he said. "In the flesh you're much prettier." Then he caught the implication of his words and felt his ears burn.

"It's lousy," she said without missing a beat. "I hate every photograph of myself I've ever seen and I almost never let anyone shoot me. The professional job on the dust jacket of my book isn't too bad."

"Haven't seen the book," Loren said. "Sorry. Ahhh—you live out on the edge of St. Louis County, right? I did read in *Newsweek* about your husband moving out and filing for divorce and a half interest in your copyright. Is that litigation what brought you here?"

"Partly curiosity about you but mostly that," she admitted. "I would like you to represent me."

"I'm not licensed to practice in Missouri. . . ."

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"Along with my attorney there," she went on. "From what I've read about you, I'm hoping you'll come up with a strategy my regular lawyer wouldn't have thought of in a thousand years. I can pay you very well to try."

"The law school pays me reasonably well to teach."

Her soft brown eyes seemed to glow with shadowed light. "The fee needn't be just in cash," she whispered.

At midnight, when the bar closed, they cabbed downtown to the high-rise hotel where under an assumed name she had taken a suite on the executive floor. They sat in flanking tan leather armchairs in the empty lounge reserved for that floor's tenants and looked out at the phantom glow from the night lights of the city as he listened to the rest of her story.

A woman in her early thirties, attractive, living for years in an emotional shell after a short, disastrous marriage to an abusive drunk when she was twenty. Beneficiary of a share in a trust fund created under the will of a distant cousin's widow whose husband had been the founder of the Crane Chemical empire. Blessed with a guarantee of forty to fifty thousand dollars of unearned income for the rest of her life, Margaret Crane had lived quietly in a modest frame house on a hill overlooking one of the westernmost suburbs of St. Louis County, reading, gardening, keeping a diary, tinkering off and on with various drafts of the novel she had dreamed of writing since her days as a literature major under Stanley Elkin and Howard Nemerov at Washington University. She had driven into St. Louis one Sunday afternoon for a jazz recital and happened to meet a man, tall, thin, prematurely gray, soft-spoken, gentle, and eaten alive by barely acknowledged loneliness, as she herself was. His name was John Burke and he was a graduate of the University of Missouri Law School but had discovered he had a minimal aptitude for legal practice and was eking out a modest living as a municipal bond broker. "The first movie we saw together was a revival of *Marnie,* the Hitchcock picture. That's what he started calling me. He said I reminded him of Tippi Hedren." After a few weeks she had felt herself falling in love again. Terrified at the prospect of making another wrong choice, she ran. That was six winters ago, when the blizzard had grounded her plane at O'Hare and chance had thrust her against Loren in the van trundling stranded travelers to motels.

"Did you put me in your diary?" Loren asked.

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Her eyes misted with bittersweet memory. "Half a page," she said. "And I have tiny handwriting."

Sometime during her three months on the run from herself she made a decision. Margaret Crane and John Burke were married by a judge in the St. Louis County Courthouse one morning late in February. "It was a terribly windy day. The license blew out of Jack's hand as we were running across the plaza from the clerk's office to the courtrooms and we had to chase after it." There were no witnesses, no bridesmaid or best man, just the two of them. Jack had given up his apartment in midtown St. Louis, moved into her house, and encouraged her to resume serious work on her novel. "He did the cooking several nights a week so I'd have more time to write." Eventually she was satisfied with *Slumber Party* and the manuscript was submitted to one publisher after another. After a year and a half a small house offered her a contract. When it was published, it attracted the same attention and readership as almost every other first novel: next to none. Until the evening of that carefully orchestrated visit to a Washington bookshop at the end of the presidential jog, followed within a few short weeks by heaps of fame and money.

"That was when Jack changed," she said. "It was—as if the man I knew and loved had crumbled to dust and a stranger had taken his place. He blew up at me day after day for no reason. Twice he slapped me. I swear I never asked for any of that money and attention but Jack bitterly resented me for getting it out of the blue while he had to keep slogging away as a bond salesman. And then I suppose he started thinking about his situation like a lawyer."

"That's when he moved out and sued for a divorce?"

"We call it dissolution in Missouri. He filed for divorce and for a judgment that he owns half the copyright in *Slumber Party* and the other novel I wrote while the first one was making the rounds. It's called *Women's Places*. It won't be out for a few months yet and already there are movie offers in six figures."

"Is his lawyer any good?"

"He's representing himself," she said.

"That's usually a bad mistake. You know the old saying, a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client?"

"Jack is no fool," she told him. "I'm afraid this is a very simple case. He doesn't need to cut someone else in on what he can squeeze out of me."

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"What makes you so sure he's entitled to a half interest? I don't remember Missouri as being a community property state."

"The courts in Missouri do what most states do nowadays in divorce cases. They practice what's called equitable distribution of marital assets. Practically speaking, it's almost the same as community property. Thank heaven he can't take any of my trust fund!"

"Okay," Loren asked, leaning forward, "so how can I possibly help you?"

In the nightglow she pressed her lips together until they were a thin pencil line of flesh slightly darker than her face. "I don't know," she admitted after a long hesitation. "Moral support? Maybe investigating Jack's life before we met, finding some dirt I could use to make him drop his financial claim?"

"That's a job for a private detective," Loren said. "I'm sure your lawyer's thought of that already. . . . Wait a minute, here's a thought. Suppose you claim you'd written most of *Slumber Party* before you married him? Wouldn't that take the copyright out of the category of marital assets and make it like your trust fund, something he can't reach?"

She chewed on her lower lip in concentration. "I'm afraid it wouldn't help much. All but a few scenes of the final draft were written after our honeymoon. I discarded most of what I'd done when I was single."

"Could he prove that?"

"I hate to admit it, but yes he could, very easily, by subpoenaing my diary. I kept detailed notes on how the script was going."

"Damn." Loren stifled a yawn, realized that he was more than half asleep, and glanced at his wristwatch. "Peggy . . . Marnie . . ."

"I guess I still think of myself as Marnie," she said.

"It's way past my bedtime. Why don't I grab a cab home and we can talk more about your problem in a day or two, after I've had time to give it some more thought? Are you staying in town that long?"

"Maybe a lot longer." She hesitated, her eyes squinting in concentration. "I'm—well, just a little afraid to go home."

"For heaven's sake, why?"

"Suppose—just suppose something should happen to me while I'm still legally married. The income from my trust fund would shift to other Cranes I've never even met, but Jack would wind up with half of everything else."

"You mean your will leaves half your estate to him?"

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"It used to leave him everything. After we were married we made wills in each other's favor. When he walked out and started divorce proceedings I hired my own lawyer and he told me to tear up my will right away and I did."

"You made a new will?"

"I don't have any family to leave my property to, and I'm afraid I've never had a favorite charity. But my lawyer said if I died without a will before the divorce became final, Jack would take everything by intestate succession, but if I died and had a will he could claim against it and be entitled to half. I figured he'd be tempted less if I had a will, so I made a new one that cuts Jack out and leaves everything to whatever distant relatives would get my estate under the laws of intestate succession. It was the only way I could think of to handle the situation." She paused, just long enough so that Loren stopped concentrating on the legal issue and focused on her. "I don't think it's worked," she said then. "I—believe someone's been following me the last few days."

"Jack?"

"No, a man much younger than Jack, a stranger. Or maybe my overheated imagination," she added with a low, nervous giggle.

Loren stood up from the leather chair and strode to the glass-paneled lounge door as if he half expected to see an assassin with a gun on the other side. "I'm taking you to your room now," he told her. "And you're going to put on the deadbolt before I go downstairs. I'll call you in the morning." He looked at his wrist watch. "Late."

"That would be nice," she said. He was grateful that nothing in her voice invited him to do more, because at that hour he was too exhausted either to love or protect her properly. With the barrier of her suite door between them, they softly wished each other good night a few minutes later.

He called a cab from a pay phone in the lobby and was waiting at the corner for a glowing roof light to appear on the night-cloaked street when a man came out of the shadow of the bar diagonally across from the hotel and trotted in Loren's direction. A young man of bantamweight build, dressed in contemporary grunge: reversed baseball cap, dark warmup jacket, and sweatpants. Untrimmed moustache blending into half a week's whiskers. His face made him seem near thirty, but probably he was closer to twenty. "Yo," he said. "Four Eyes. Clark Kent. You with the glasses." His voice was weak and hoarse and he kept clearing his throat as if something

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were wrong with his larynx. Loren felt knots form in his stomach but made himself face the youth.

"Next time I even think you and her are together, you both get a slice cut out of each eyeball. Clear?" Grunge kept his hands buried in his sweatpants pockets. Loren prayed he wasn't carrying a knife there, hoped against hope for a patrol car to glide along one of the cross streets. Nothing moved in any direction. It was as if they were the last creatures alive in the city. Loren swallowed fear.

"You wondering why I care, stud?" Loren was silent, fighting the urge to vomit in the gutter. "It's 'cause the slut's my mother," Grunge flung at him. He made a gesture of obscene contempt and turned his back so that Loren could see the St. Louis Cardinals logo on his cap as he jogged away into the shadows.

When the cab drew up a minute later, Loren asked the driver to circle the block, but by then the youth had melted back into the empty night.

The first thing he did after deadbolting himself into his own condo was to reach for the phone and wake up an old friend, a retired detective captain who now headed a private security agency. Ten minutes of conversation and it was agreed: the agency's best available operative would be in the hotel lobby first thing in the morning with instructions to call Marnie Crane's suite, explain Loren's arrangement, and offer protection. The next thing Loren did was try to get some sleep. He failed. Too many turbulent memories whirled through him.

When he reached his office a little before noon the next day, he found three pink message slips thrust under his door, all from her number at the hotel. She picked up on the first ring and he told of his encounter with Grunge in the deserted street. "Now we know who's been following you," he finished. "Now you see why I arranged for a bodyguard."

"Loren, I . . ." She seemed unable to speak for several seconds. "I appreciate your concern but—whoever that young man is, he can't be my son." She heard the question in Loren's puzzled silence and answered it without being asked. "I have never had a child or been pregnant," she told him. "I've been sterile all my life."

Loren had never studied or offered a course in copyright law, but five years earlier a faculty colleague who, among other subjects, taught intellectual property had had to undergo bypass surgery in

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mid-semester, and Loren had wound up taking over that class for a month. After Marnie had flown home without incident and an agency in St. Louis County had assumed the security function, he remembered his old lecture notes and spent two days poring through them for a legal point he had scrawled down at the time but never pursued. When he found it again, he put in a week's worth of evenings on research. Then he made two long-distance calls, first to Marnie and later to the lawyer handling her divorce, a superannuated solo practitioner named Kurzweil whose phone voice was a senile cackle. That evening, but this time at a decent hour, he again called his friend the retired captain and hired the agency for a research job beyond his own capacity. His free time during the rest of the semester he devoted to writing a brief for the St. Louis County Circuit Court. An hour after his final class of the term, he caught a flight to Lambert International Airport, where Marnie and Kurzweil were waiting near the luggage carousels. The divorce lawyer's hair was the color of dirty snow and his face was wrinkled like a crumpled map. Loren rented a Camry and followed them to the Ritz-Carlton, a luxury hotel in the county seat of Clayton. They sat over an elegant high tea and conferred, with Loren lecturing more than he would have in class.

Halfway across the room a short, balding, triple-chinned man of perhaps forty was loudly sipping tea, wolfing petits fours, and carefully not looking at Loren's table. Loren remembered seeing the man in the tearoom when he and Marnie and Kurzweil had entered. *Her local bodyguard,* he had thought. *Out of his element here like a fat carp in champagne.*

When the conference broke up and he was alone in his suite on the top floor he phoned the manager of the St. Louis agency, who laughed at Loren's question uproariously.

"Wrong church, wrong pew," he spluttered between guffaws. "You didn't come close to spotting our security, Professor. Remember seeing a bland middle-aged couple, quiet as mice, sitting in the lobby as you went into the tearoom?" Loren was silent. "Didn't think you would. Those were our guys. Married couple, twenty years apiece in the Secret Service before they went private. They followed you in from the airport and beat you into the hotel while you were parking. I just got off the phone with them before you called."

"They never came into the tearoom, just hung out in the lobby?"

"They came in ten minutes behind you," the manager said. "Had their eyes on you every second. You just never made them. That's why they're detectives and you're not."

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"Did they notice the fat guy?"

"Not only notice him, they think they can ID him. Woman sneaked a snap of him with a midget camera in her compact. We'll check around and let you know in a day or so."

Another stalker in Marnie's life, Loren thought, and remembered that he'd better ask about the first one, the bandit-moustached youth who had claimed to be Marnie's son.

"Missed him too, hah?" The agency manager knew Loren was paying his bill but couldn't seem to keep his contempt for an amateur out of his voice. "Kid was out at the airport when you flew in. He stayed fifty, sixty yards away from you and the woman and the lawyer, but he was there. Followed you into Clayton in a dark-gray '92 Nissan Sentra but didn't go into the hotel. Our couple spotted him but stuck to the script and stayed with your party. We have no idea where he went, but we got his license number. Give us a day. Any other way we can serve you, Professor?"

Loren said nothing for more than a minute, the phone handset pressed to his ear, eyes squeezed shut as he thought furiously. "Just one more thing," he said then, very softly. "How are your contacts with the police out here?"

"Hell of a lot better than P.I.s in storybooks or else we wouldn't be in business," the manager said. "Why do you care?"

"Because I want you to get hold of whatever doctor they use when they need to get more details from a witness," Loren told him, "and arrange for the person to hypnotize me."

On a chilly Thursday morning he stood at a lectern in the Kniep Courtroom of St. Louis University's School of Law with a clamorous potpourri of students and media people at his back, a handful of curious professors in the jury box off to one side, and a copy of his brief before him. The judge hearing his motion had seen the potential importance of the issue Loren had raised and, being both an alumnus of the law school and a member of its adjunct faculty, had arranged for the oral argument to be held in its moot court facility, where interested students and professors as well as the press could attend. Marnie Crane, in a long-skirted midnight-blue ensemble and her hair pinned back in a businesslike French twist, sat at the polished counsel table to Loren's left with little Kurzweil nervously twisting his ancient fingers beside her. At an identical table to Loren's right sat gray-thatched Jack Burke, alone and frowning. The judge rapped his gavel three times and the courtroom buzzing died.

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"Your honor," Loren began, "as you know, I've been admitted to the Missouri bar *pro hac vice* for purposes of arguing this motion. It's unusual for a state court to have to decide an issue of federal copyright law and especially one that so few lawyers are aware of, but this is the court's duty today. Section two-oh-one(e) of the Copyright Act of nineteen seventy-six is as clear as legislative drafting can ever be."

Judge Dumbleton peered over the bench at Loren through huge-lensed trifocals and spoke into the portable microphone set up for him. "Perhaps for the benefit of those in the audience who have not read your brief, Professor, you should summarize the section." Even with the mike his voice was close to inaudible. Kurzweil had told Loren over high tea that behind the judge's back the courthouse crowd called him Mumbleton.

"With pleasure, sir." Loren turned a page of his brief. "The section provides that if an author hasn't voluntarily transferred his or her rights, then 'no action by any governmental body or other official or organization purporting to seize, expropriate, transfer, or exercise rights of ownership with respect to the copyright, or any of the exclusive rights under a copyright, shall be given effect under this title.' The only exception to this rule is in bankruptcy cases. We contend that the plain meaning of two-oh-one(e) is to preclude state courts from dividing up an author's copyright interests as matrimonial property in a divorce action."

"Why would Congress have wanted to deprive state courts of this power?" Loren had to strain to make out the question.

"I'm not sure the result was consciously intended. As my brief indicates, section two-oh-one(e) was first proposed in nineteen seventy-three when the Soviet Union joined the Universal Copyright Convention. There was fear in certain quarters that the Soviet government would pass internal legislation nationalizing the copyrights of dissidents like Solzhenitsyn and then be able to sue in the courts of other countries, including the United States, and have the publication of dissidents' works enjoined. Section two-oh-one(e) was designed to thwart any such ploy."

"Professor, your brief does not explain why this section of the copyright act was broadened to cover expropriations by our own federal or state governments."

"The legislative history makes it clear that it wasn't broadened inadvertently," Loren replied. "But no one involved in the process seems to have realized that they were creating a link between copy-

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right and divorce law that hadn't existed before. Nevertheless, the language of the provision is clear and the principle is squarely in line with several other changes in the nineteen seventy-six Copyright Act that expand authors' rights."

"The court is bothered," Judge Dumbleton remarked, "by the way 201(e) discriminates against women." His glance flitted about the courtroom as if in search of approving nods from media feminists. "Does it not deny married women their equitable share of the copyrightable works created during their marriage?"

"It discriminates against women only if you assume that all or most authors are men," Loren said. "A glance at the counsel table to my left will show the court that the author in this case is not. A few minutes with the card catalog of this university's library or any library in America will show the court that vast numbers of authors are women. Section two-oh-one(e) treats men and women exactly alike. It protects the author spouse from involuntary transfer of copyrights regardless of which sex the author happens to be."

"Thank you, Professor Mensing. The court will now hear opposing counsel."

Loren took the empty chair beside Marnie at the counsel table as Jack Burke in his pin-striped lawyer suit rose with brief in hand and replaced Loren at the lectern. "May it please the court," he began in a fine rich baritone. "As the court knows, I am a member of the Missouri bar, representing myself in this matter. I am by no means an expert on copyright law."

"Nor is anyone in this room," Dumbleton said. "Unless of course the fellow who teaches it at the school is present." The audience tittered and giggled as courtroom spectators will when a feeble joke is cracked by a judge on the bench. "Proceed, counsel."

"Your Honor, the only reported decision raising the two-oh-one(e) issue is *In re Marriage of Worth*, decided by the California Court of Appeals in nineteen eighty-seven. The court in that case flatly rejected Professor Mensing's thesis and ruled, first, that copyrights were community property under California law and, second, that that law was not preempted by section two-oh-one(e) of the Copyright Act."

"Missouri of course is not a community property state," the judge interrupted.

"For purposes of this issue, there is no significant distinction between community property states and those that practice equitable division of matrimonial assets upon divorce. Furthermore, at least

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one of the two leading law review articles on the subject contends that the very act of an author's getting married should be treated as implied consent to judicial division of copyright interests if the marriage is dissolved. If there's implied consent, there's no involuntary transfer, and therefore no two-oh-one(e) issue."

"The other leading article, the one cited in Professor Mensing's brief, I believe contends just the opposite?"

"Indeed, your honor. But . . ." Loren had prepared thoroughly and none of Burke's arguments surprised him. The active part of his mind began to wander. After a while he realized that both what Burke said and how he said it were disturbing him profoundly. Marnie slipped her hand into Loren's beneath the counsel table and he could feel her tremble as if something in that packed courtroom beneath its oval of harsh light was terrifying her.

"Thank you for an excellent presentation." Judge Dumbleton cut Burke off after what seemed to Loren like hours. "The court will take the matter under advisement. And," he said to the dozens of students beginning to stir in their seats, "thank you all for coming. I look forward to your practicing before me in a few years if I'm still alive then." The room exploded in another round of titters as Dumbleton pounded his gavel, rose, and meandered offstage through a private exit. Three university security guards moved along the center aisle gently herding students and reporters out of the chamber.

"We're going to lose," Marnie whispered to her lawyers as the courtroom emptied. Loren felt an uneasy pang. Where was the agency bodyguard who was supposed to be watching her? The three of them and Burke were alone in the room now. "That judge has decided against us already, I can feel it."

"*I* think our argument went very well indeed," Kurzweil croaked as if half the credit for it were his.

"No." She twisted in her chair to face Loren. "We have to settle now. Maybe he'll take a quarter or a third of the copyrights if we . . ." Burke nodded curtly to his estranged wife and her legal team and strode past his adversaries' table and up the carpeted aisle. "Jack, wait!" She snatched her purse from the floor and trotted in his wake with Loren and Kurzweil half a dozen steps behind her.

"She's gone crazy," the older attorney panted as they passed through the narrow vestibule to the main corridor of the law school. "This is no time to . . ." Loren didn't wait for him to finish but crossed the reception area to where several women students were congre-

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gated with disappointment on their faces and copies of *Slumber Party* clutched in their hands. "She went in there, Professor." One of the women pointed to the entrance door of the law library across the corridor. "She was a few feet behind her husband and then another man went in a few seconds after her."

The bodyguard, Loren thought. *Good.*

"Wiry little guy with a thick moustache," another student chimed in. "Needs a shave."

Loren's heart dropped. He whirled and raced into the library and through the turnstile with his eyes darting everywhere for Marnie and Burke and then he saw them huddled together halfway down a narrow aisle flanked by high orange-painted steel shelves, and he ran toward them frantically waving his arms. "Get out!" he roared. "He's in here somewhere. Both of you, out now!" Marnie's mouth opened in the birth of a gasp of fright. He seized her arm and hustled her along the aisle with a befuddled Burke in their rear, and the three of them stormed out of the library into the main corridor where Loren hunted wildly for some sign of the bodyguard but saw only a few knots of students and Kurzweil. "Will you kindly tell me what . . ." Burke began.

That was the moment when all hell broke loose. The whiskered youth stepped out of the library behind them and drew a semiautomatic pistol from his jacket and dropped to a combat crouch screaming "Slut!" and "You damned whore!" again and again as he aimed at Marnie and Burke, who stood paralyzed six inches apart. The pistol made a coughing sound and there was stereophonic screaming from the panicked students in the reception area. Loren dived for Marnie and knocked her to the floor as the pistol coughed and Burke tumbled on top of him. For an endless moment he thought he'd taken a bullet himself and then he knew the blood oozing down him was Burke's. "You okay?" he panted. Marnie was ghost-faced and silent, but didn't seem to be bleeding. Loren crawled erect as university security guards surrounded him. "George is chasing him down Lindell Boulevard," one man said. "He's Marine Reserve and a Gulf War vet, he'll catch the bastard. Cops are on the way."

A tall young black guard looked up from where he knelt with a hand on Burke's carotid artery. "This one's gone," he said. "Lady seems okay."

"Oh Jack," Marnie said softly and shuddered beyond control. "Oh God." Loren struggled to her and held her close as the wailing of sirens came nearer.

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* * *

"Two of them." The axe-faced detective lieutenant pulled his earlobe and frowned at Loren across a desktop littered with food wrappings, Styrofoam cups, and official paper. "A tag team."

It was midafternoon. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees, and forecasters were predicting snow. Kurzweil had vanished long ago, Marnie was in her own suite at the Ritz-Carlton under police guard and sedation, and Loren still sat on the edge of the splintery chair in the lieutenant's cubicle, trying to absorb and align what they now knew.

The first thing they'd learned was why the agency bodyguard had vanished. Sitting in the courtroom audience, he'd spotted the other hit man, the balding fat one, who in turn had sensed he'd been recognized and made a hasty exit. The bodyguard had taken a fool's chance, leaving Loren and Marnie unprotected while he tried without success to catch the fat man. "Which gave Tubby's sidekick the opening to take the lady out," the lieutenant concluded. "Only his aim was off."

By then they had recovered the semiautomatic which the young gunman had tossed down a Lindell Boulevard sewer in his flight from Fearless George, and a usable print had told the police who he was. As luck would have it, the shooter might easily have served with George in the desert. "Seven years in the infantry," the lieutenant had summarized for Loren after scanning the report. "Won all sorts of marksmanship medals, got terminated in the defense cutbacks, chose killing civilians for his new career. He's been a suspect in a few hits for hire around St. Louis, but this is the first time he's left real evidence behind."

"And he thought Marnie Crane was his *mother?*" Loren marveled.

"Ahhh, that was a load of bull. His mother lives here in town and he visits her every week. We have her place under surveillance now in case he tries to hide with her."

Thanks to the surreptitious photo Loren's private agency pair had snapped in the Ritz tearoom, the fat one's identity was known too: he was a professional with murder warrants out for him in three states. Loren could hardly believe he hadn't noticed either hit man in the courtroom, but the place had been packed, his back had been to the audience, and his mind on the oral argument. He sat beside the chaotic desk and dredged deep into himself, trying to sort it all out while the lieutenant chewed dry bagels, slurped rancid coffee, fielded phone calls, shuffled papers, and behaved in general as if he

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were alone in the cubicle. When Loren raised his head and cleared his throat, the lieutenant looked at him without interest. Then he went back to his paperwork, while Loren wrestled the temptation to open the floodgates and tell the whole story.

He sat in the dark bay window of his hotel suite and watched the silken snow sift down through the deep night and coat the city and thought back to another snow-cloaked night almost six years ago. "That was a beautiful night," he said. The woman in the matching club chair at an angle to his seemed herself again, the shock and sedation worn away, but the carafe of wine they'd ordered with their late supper had not erased the tautness at the corners of her eyes and mouth. "I remember that night as if it were yesterday." He paused then. "Do you?"

"I'll never forget it," she replied soft as the snow.

"Tell me what you remember." He reached for her hand and took it between his own.

"Well—I fell against you in that airport bus and we had a few drinks in the motel lounge, Maker's Mark straight up. Later we went down to the pool for a swim and we could see the snow falling all around us through the glass walls."

"Tell me something you didn't put in your diary later," Loren said.

The request shook her for a moment, then her teeth began to play with her lower lip. "Darling, how could you possibly know what I did or didn't put in my diary?" Behind the note of forced gaiety Loren heard fear.

"Because I drove to your house late this afternoon while you were sedated," he said, "and broke in and searched till I found it. I don't have it with me now." He reached into the breast pocket of his blazer. "But I made a photocopy of the half page about us. Tell me something that's not on it."

The fear was crawling into her eyes now and she took short breaths through her mouth as if there weren't enough air in the room. "My God, Loren! I know you saved my life this morning but . . . breaking into my house . . ."

"So you owe me," he told her. "I saved your life and your copyrights too. Come on, just one detail."

She swallowed, licked dry lips, tried to concentrate. "You—told me you were a law professor," she began.

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"No, I didn't. All we exchanged were first names. You said you wanted the night to be magical, remember? You knew nothing about me till you read a write-up in the paper a few years later."

"Oh, of course!" She tried to smile at him, but the acid of fear made it ghastly. "I'm sorry, the shock of seeing Jack murdered right in front of me has messed up my memory."

"Let's try again. What color was your bikini?" he demanded. "The one you wore in the pool that night?"

"I—why it was, was blue. Loren, why in the name of . . . ?"

"It wasn't a bikini." Loren said it as if he were in court, cross-examining a hostile witness. "It was a maillot. Whose room did we make love in, yours or mine? What did the note say that you left on the pillow?" She sat in shrunken silence as Loren stood and loomed over her. "Come on, one little detail! I had myself hypnotized the other day so hundreds of details came back but I could remember so much of it before. Such a magical night and it's a blank?"

"There was an ice storm, both our planes were grounded in Chicago . . ." she began in a dull, trancelike, hopeless voice.

"You're not Margaret Crane," Loren said. "You look something like her, probably you're related, but you're not Marnie. She went back to St. Louis County and married Burke and he brought you into the picture. You got good at forging her signature and you learned to look as much like her as possible. She was a loner, there weren't many people you had to fool. The two of you killed her and disposed of the body and settled back to enjoy fifty thousand a year in trust income. Everything went fine until the president made a bestseller out of that novel she'd sold before she was murdered. Suddenly money was pouring down on the two of you like that snow. Burke got greedy. Dumped you and sued for a half interest in the copyright. You couldn't blow the whistle on him without convicting yourself.

"Then you remembered that half page in the real Marnie's diary. You knew who I was and what I did from that news article, and you came to me. For legal advice, but mainly to involve me in your next murder plan. That kid who stopped me on the street, threatened to kill us both, claimed to be your son—he was your hit man. You were setting the stage so when the right moment came you'd go over next to Burke in some public place and the gunman would pop out of nowhere and scream names at you and seem to fire at you but hit Burke. Leaving his lawsuit moot and the copyrights all yours. The shooter was a top marksman in the military but you were still

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taking a big risk. I'm not surprised you needed sedation."

She sat stunned and spent in the club chair, her eyes focused on the shifting snow and seeing nothing.

"You made some mistakes," Loren said. "Your biggest was telling me Burke was a failure as a lawyer. I heard him in court today and it was perfectly plain to me and Judge Dumbleton that he was an excellent lawyer. But I sensed something wrong from the first time you approached me. I'm a middle-aged academic. There aren't . . ." He had to stop for a few moments. "There aren't many magical nights in my life. I remembered Marnie vividly. I always will. Something about you was subtly different. I didn't understand how you were using me until the shooter came out of the library screaming at you. I tried to knock both you and Burke to the floor but . . . Not that either of you were worth saving. . . ."

She shuddered uncontrollably like someone in an epileptic fit. Then she relaxed as if a crisis had passed, stood with her arm on the back of the club chair, and smiled at him almost fondly. "You win," she said. "I confess. It all happened just the way you figured it out." For a moment Loren almost believed she looked stronger because she was sharing the bloody truth. "Now just what do you think you can do about it?" she demanded. "I didn't live with Burke for three years without learning some law. You are my attorney. Whatever I tell you is a confidential communication. You have an ethical obligation never to repeat it to a soul."

He'd expected that and had spent most of the long drive back from his break-in rehearsing his answer. "The hell I do," he told her. "As far as I'm concerned my only obligation is to Marnie Crane. The real one. I don't owe you a damn thing. But let's just suppose you're right, let's suppose it's unethical for me to go to the police. What's my punishment? Will I lose my license to practice law in Missouri? I don't have one, remember? I was admitted temporarily just to argue your motion." She tore at him with her eyes but stayed silent and unmoving. "But if it meant I could never appear in court anywhere again it would be worth it to put you away," he said. "Do you think I'd let you get away with murdering . . ." He stopped. He'd exposed too much of himself already. "Get out," he said.

She stayed where she was like the stone image of a woman. A lamp across the room etched her reflection into the dark glass of the bay window. "You're—going to tell the police?"

"Maybe I have already and they're waiting for you in the corridor. Maybe I'll wait awhile, see if the second hit man gets lucky."

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Her eyes widened with uncertainty, and he wanted to sing.

"You never saw him, but there was a fat bald fellow in the tearoom downstairs when we went in the other day. He was also in court with us this morning and would have killed you if the bodyguard hadn't spotted him and scared him off. He's still out there waiting for another crack at you." When he saw the surge of naked fear on her face he felt the savage pleasure a rapist feels. "If he was in the tearoom ahead of us, he must have known exactly where we were going. Only three people knew that: you, me, and Kurzweil. Remember how you told me Kurzweil had you make a will leaving all your estate to whoever your, I mean the real Marnie's, intestate successors might be? Well, either he knew who they are, or found out, and made a deal with one or more of them for a piece of all your property, the house, the copyrights, everything. And then he hired the fat man. A professional killer."

He waited and let the terror eat into her before he went on. "I phoned Judge Dumbleton's chambers late this afternoon and learned something that confirmed my hunch. It wasn't the judge's own idea to hold the oral argument at the law school, it was Kurzweil's suggestion. The fat man couldn't have shot you in the County Courthouse because everyone has to pass through a metal detector at the entrance doors. Law schools don't use them. That made you a sitting duck."

"Oh my God," she kept mumbling. "My God, what can I do?"

"That," Loren said in a voice of chilled steel, "is your problem. Maybe you'll be safe from him in a cell if you confess. Now get out."

When she was gone he deadbolted himself into the suite and went to the bay window and sat looking out at the night city, reliving that other night of silken snow when the chain of events began.

"I wish I could have known you better," he said quietly into the empty darkness. "I wish I could have saved you."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The legal issue Loren Mensing argued in this story is a real one that few lawyers or authors seem to be aware of. Anyone who wants to explore the issue in depth might be interested in my article "When an Author's Marriage Dies: The Copyright-Divorce Connection," published in the April 1990 issue of the *Journal of the Copyright Society* and available in most law libraries.

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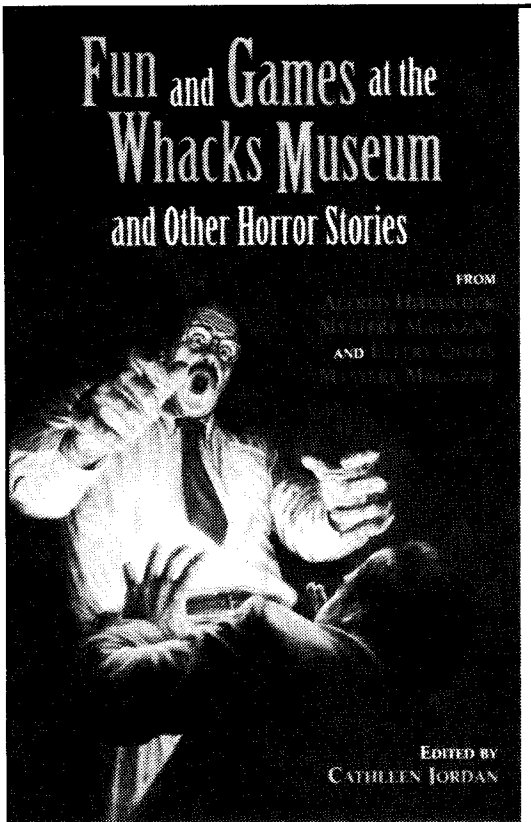

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THE BROTHERS

by JOYCE CAROL OATES

They came for him one windy October dusk when he was walking alone after his final class of the week. He looked up, and he was descending the steep hill behind the old Hubbard Street neighborhood. His eyes were watering in the wind lifting from the river beyond the Erie Central railroad yard a few blocks from the brick row house where his family had lived. The neighborhood had been razed, bulldozed into oblivion and recast as expressway ramps, cloverleafs, and soaring lanes in the years since he'd left, gone away to college, and begun his adult life; his family too had moved, like all the families and all the merchants of Hubbard Street. Yet here he was on the hill he'd sledded on as a child, a smell of snow in the air and his heart beating in anticipation as if it knew what he did not *They are coming for me!* glancing up to see them where a moment before there'd been no one: an empty stretch of field grasses and scrub trees, of that bleak, sere, wind-tormented color of autumn after the first frost.

They greeted him with boyish excitement.

"John Michael!—you're just in time."

"John Michael!—we've been waiting for you."

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At first, they seemed to have corduroy faces, sand-colored. Shiny black button eyes. Sleek shiny black hair like painted-on hair. And it was impossible to gauge how old they were, even how tall they were; he hesitated to stare, not wanting to seem rude. Their voices rang warmly in his ears without actual sound. He was allowed to know *This is the truest way of communication.* What surprised him most, as if it were a revelation of a part of himself hidden until now, was his own childlike excitement, even happiness, in greeting them.

Though his words were strange, and oddly formal: "I tried not to be late. I had to come a long distance."

And this was true, for he lived far away now from the city of his boyhood. Far away, and nearly twenty years, from Hubbard Street.

"John Michael!—we must hurry."

"John Michael!—there isn't much time."

They reached out boldly for him. Their faces were brightened by smiles and were almost blinding. This intense light obscured their features; or their features were fluid, not yet coalesced. *Which is so superior to the average.* He seemed to know there was a plan, everything had been agreed upon beforehand, but he could not remember the plan. At the same time, it had already happened. A buoyant sensation began in his chest as if his heart was swelling.

"My name is—"

"*My* name is—"

He understood that they were brothers though he hadn't been able to hear their names. The vibrations reached his ears as if through an element dense as water but scattered in teasing ripples.

One of them seized his left hand, and the other seized his right hand, and both tugged at him. He was standing on a dirt path slightly above the brothers and the effect of their tugging was to pull him off balance so that he had no choice but to join them; at the same time, he was overjoyed to be with them.

The three of them ran down the hill slipping and sliding and shouting with excitement. The hill was the scrubby field above Hubbard Street, where in John Michael Wells's memory windblown litter had marred the striated surface of the tall grasses, like lint in the nap of a carpet, yet it was suddenly an unknown place, steep and treacherous and coated in ice. Or something sly-slippery underfoot as ice. Shiny, blinding. Intense pleasure and the knowledge *This is the truest way of happiness* rose in him from the ground, through his feet and into his legs and so up into his groin, his belly, his chest *There is no other way of happiness* as the brothers yanked

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him forward, down the hill. Their breaths were steaming. "It's cold! It's so cold!" he cried, laughing. Knowing that they, his brothers, would warm him.

The next night, he learned their names.

"He's Damm—"

"He's Vann—"

Each pointed to the other in an identical mirror gesture, as if practiced. Yet they were not twins, exactly—one appeared to be distinctly older, stockier, than the other; one's hair was that curious sleek-shiny black, and the other had thick deep-textured hair, black also, but separated into sections, with measured parts. They were on Hubbard Street, though nothing looked familiar, the background passed in a blur as if the brothers had not yet worked out where they were taking him exactly, in fact they seemed to be quarreling about this even as they spoke nonstop to him, their warm-rippling soundless words washing over him like caresses. The brothers were on either side of him—Damm to his left, Vann to his right—and they were gripping his hands tight so that he understood he was a little boy, a child, despite his height, which he was trying awkwardly to conceal. They were not on Hubbard Street but in the playground of his elementary school which was not as he remembered it but close enough for him to know what it was meant to be and that there was danger here as so frequently there'd been danger for him in that playground when he was a child attending this school, and so suddenly he tried to wrench himself away, his muscles went into a kind of spasm, and Damm and Vann murmured words of comfort and gripped his hands tight to calm, to steady. He wanted to cry *Seeing how your brothers care for you, that is the only truth* but this too he managed to conceal.

"John Michael!—you want to."

"John Michael!—that's *good.*"

They were pulling him forward forcing him to go where he didn't but at the same time did want to go—to another child, or children, in a corner of the playground where the school's brick walls formed an L. Here, certain acts occurred. There were no names given to these acts and so there was no memory accruing to these acts except the memory of revulsion and shame.

Yes but you know nothing ever happened there. You know there was nothing.

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Damm was tugging at him, and Vann was tugging at him, and the danger was close by but *your brothers will protect you* and so he felt a radiant buoyancy that shifted into quicksilver anger, strange laughing anger. He saw the face, blurred as if glimpsed through water, of one whom he hated, and of whom he had not thought in thirty years; and other jeering child-faces; but he was laughing, and Damm and Vann were laughing, so it was all right. He passed through these figures as if in fact they were water.

Anger grew in him like a flame rising from his groin into his chest, and into his throat. An actual heat, a flamey tingling in his throat. He was trying to speak to that child-face blankly jeering as a mask but there was something wrong with his tongue, his mouth, the sounds that came from him were guttural and staccato, a rattling in his throat. He was choking, he was dying! Was this dying? *Help me! help me!* he begged the brothers. Swallowing compulsively to quench the fire at the back of his mouth but he could not and as Damm and Vann cried *John Michael! John Michael!* he slipped from the grip of their hands helpless as a child falling on the playground's cracked asphalt pavement. *Don't let me go, where are you?—not so soon.* His head jerked on the damp pillow bunched beneath his neck, his eyes flew open for a long moment sightless, his throat was raw as if abraded—he'd been deeply asleep with his head back, mouth agape. Breathing through his mouth so that his throat had become dehydrated and the uncomfortable sensation had waked him.

Snoring, too—he must have been snoring, like a hog. He'd been hearing it, dry-rasping saw-notched sounds coming, it seemed, from a distance.

Awake, he felt such loss. A sensation as of falling. Paralysis. The lineaments of the dream were rapidly fading like a cinematic image on a screen when the lights are switched on but he felt such loss!—the grip of the brothers' hands on his, his fingers in theirs, only a dream, a phantasm. Nothing.

Awake, and through the day—a day of many hours populated by many individuals, some of them professional colleagues at the university, some of them social acquaintances, friends, and in the evening his lover Crista and her six-year-old son, with whom he did not live but whom he saw almost daily—Jack retained the vivid, disturbing memory of the brothers like the afterglow of erotic con-

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summation, suffused through his entire body. *Where I really am, and who I really am.*

Did anyone notice his uncharacteristic distraction? The vagueness of his replies, his smiles? Jack Wells who was so sceptical by nature, a specialist in differential geometry and an amateur musician-composer, known among his circle of acquaintances for his dry, acerbic humor, his strong political opinions, how was it possible he felt such yearning—such heartsick yearning? To return as quickly as possible to his dreams, these strange unbidden mysterious dreams that had nothing to do with his life; no connection with the present, nor, really, with the past. *To get back to them, my brothers.*

He'd had the first dream only a few nights before. Yet it seemed to him he'd been having such dreams for years. Or, rather, he'd been experiencing this strange, almost unbearable yearning for years.

How was it possible?—it wasn't. "It's absurd."

Who the brothers were, and why Jack should care so much for them, he had no idea. He could not even remember them clearly. They were young, and there was something not quite normal about them—he seemed to know that. But he could not summon back their faces. *To ourselves, we're invisible. The brain has no face.* And what had happened in the dream of Hubbard Street, the playground of Benjamin Franklin Elementary School? *What you must not remember, you won't be able to.*

He'd never had faith that dreams meant much. Considering them in the stark light of day was largely a waste of time. He was not a man who liked to waste time. He was the kind of man who, at the periphery of a meeting or social gathering that is about to break up, jingles his car keys in his pocket.

He was the kind of man who, if someone begins speaking of his dreams, pointedly conceals a yawn.

Yet the brothers had shown him *the truest way of happiness* which he could not comprehend and which frightened him in its intensity.

For knowing how passionately he felt in these dreams he was forced to realize with what little passion he lived his life—even his sexual, erotic life.

And there were mysteries about the dreams that intrigued him: why, for instance, did the brothers call him "John Michael"?—he'd been "Jack" or "Jacky" most of his life. His baptismal name "John Michael Wells" was as remote to him as the long-deceased grandfather for whom he'd been named and whom he had scarcely known. And why a dream of *brothers* at all? Jack had one brother, Steven,

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five years his senior, an engineering consultant who lived with his wife and children in an upscale Chicago suburb; even as an adolescent Steve had shared few of Jack's interests in math, science, music—they'd gotten along amicably enough, for the most part, but had not been close. Now, they exchanged Christmas cards and ignored each other's birthday and went sometimes for as long as a year without speaking on the phone. A good, dull, decent man, Steve Wells. About whom Jack would have had to rack his brains to say anything interesting.

But what is there to say about most men and women, after all? Jack was in the habit of observing that human beings are no more *mysteries* than a banana is a *mystery*. You could never deduce what's inside a banana by examining the peel and the inside is entirely different from the peel, but so what? Why is it important?

"Jack, you're so cynical!" Crista sometimes exclaimed, as if his random remarks truly shocked her. Jack supposed she meant to flatter him. Sexual flirtation, sexual banter. But he did not consider himself cynical, only matter-of-fact; a man not given to exaggeration.

Which was why he'd been drawn to math, geometry—figures, pure structures—uninhabited by personalities—unaffected by personalities.

At the university Jack was Mr. Wells, or Professor Wells to his students. Since years ago there had ceased to be surprises in his work as in the very textbook adopted for his undergraduate course—to which Jack himself had contributed—he had no need to be deeply engaged. He was thirty-seven years old. With his steel-gray metal-rimmed glasses and his graying brown hair combed in two severe wings behind his ears and his playful habit of anticipating his students' questions even as they raised their hands, he seemed virtually of no age: not young, as his students were young; yet hardly old, smiling and youthful in his affect, with an unlined face, large dark intelligent sympathetic-seeming eyes, the body of a moderately active man—he swam, dutifully if without enthusiasm. At tennis, he was not competitive enough to be a good player. Why is it important?

One day after the dream of the playground while teaching an honors seminar in Riemannian geometry Jack heard his voice echoing from the room's corners and he realized *If these individuals see and hear me I must be here!* The profundity of this insight overwhelmed him.

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And so it was, through the hours of wakefulness: meeting with colleagues and friends, deftly scanning student work with that part of his mind that operated like a computer independent of Jack Wells's moods or "self"—even with Crista and the child whom he loved and to whom he'd become family of a kind. *They see me and hear me, am I deceiving them?*

Even making love with Crista, pushing her and himself to the release of orgasm, he felt the tug of that other yearning and wondered if all human beings harbored such secret, inexpressible desires—for the solace of dreams. If solace was what the brothers offered him.

"John Michael!—you're just in time."

"John Michael!—we've been waiting for you."

And eagerly Jack saw his brothers were not angry.

Yanked the covers off him where he was naked.

Except, bicycling, pedaling frantically to keep up with the brothers, he was wearing oversized flannel pajamas. The elastic waistband was too loose and the pants cuffs got in the way of his pedaling and the brothers were laughing at him. He was laughing too, breathing through his mouth and gasping for air. His bicycle was too big for him and seemed to be made of lengths of pipe with large spoked wheels. Damm's and Vann's bicycles were similar but their legs were longer, they were older boys. Hurtling through the street, which was Hubbard Street except not really. And the corner by the tire shop, the intersection with Mohigan where he lived in the brick row house in a block of such row houses distinguishable from one another by painted front doors and shutters, crimped little lawns, flower beds. But there was much that was blurred. Open spaces like the edge of the world, blank like a television screen with no picture. "John Michael!—John Michael!" The brothers' voices were liquidy and caressing, vibrating in his head, "John Michael!—come *on*." Laughing and teasing and just slightly impatient because he was so slow. Jack's house was fourth from the corner and a hot wave of shame washed over him seeing it so shabby, walls of rust-brown brick and the shutters painted creamy-yellow for a cheery look as Jack's mother insisted but something had happened to the house, which was like a deformed face, a face born to a baby genetically doomed to horror, he was ashamed that the brothers saw but of course the brothers knew for they lived in that house themselves. *If it's too soon if I haven't been born yet where can I go?* He dreaded

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seeing his parents before they were his parents. There was a shame to this prospect he could taste as something tarry at the back of his mouth.

Sobbing gasping for breath pedaling frantically to keep up with Damm, and with Vann, who were shouting instructions to him he could not hear—such a roaring in his ears! He saw a human shape hurtle toward him and there was a sickening *crack!* as the big front wheel of his bicycle which might have been (the details were fluid, shifting) the front wheel of a car too passed over this figure, a child, or an elderly man, and he could not stop pedaling and did not want to stop pedaling following after the brothers who were drawing farther and farther away now scolding, playfully mocking "John Michael!—*what have you done!*"

In terror then Jack woke, heart pounding and naked body which felt large, clumsy *something not myself* covered in sticky sweat. His mouth was aflame with dryness. His eyes oscillated sideways in his head. Crista, who was a light sleeper, a woman given to quick maternal solicitude, was soothing his damp hair back from his forehead asking was something wrong? had he had a bad dream? and in his confusion Jack pushed at her with his elbow, not hard enough to hurt but unmistakably. Then he saw where he was, and with whom. In his woman friend's bed. *I'm safe, it hasn't happened yet.* He assured Crista it had only been a dream, a confused dream of playing tennis—"Sorry! Try to go back to sleep."

He stumbled sleep-dazed into the hall to use the bathroom, hearing Crista's low anxious voice behind him. As if, poor woman, she halfway feared Jack might slip away in one of his moods in the night without a farewell kiss.

Of course, Jack would never do such a thing. Even if he could have grabbed his clothes and dressed in the bathroom without Crista's knowing.

He was shaken, for something terrible had happened. It helped to rinse his guilty heated face in cold water. Avoiding his eyes in the mirror. *But nobody saw. Nobody except my brothers.*

But he was fully awake, and he was all right. Never can you deduce: the banana is *not* the peel.

He used the toilet and flushed it reluctantly and self-consciously hoping he wouldn't wake Lonnie, whose room was across the hall. Small quarters here in Crista's rented house. She was a legal secretary and the firm for which she worked had suffered financial losses

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through the recession, she'd had no raise for two years but was embarrassed taking money from Jack, though sometimes she had no choice, if not taking money from him then allowing him to pay Lonnie's dentist's bills, or for a new winter jacket, as if, if he married her, if he brought her and Lonnie to his own more spacious living quarters in a high-rise condominium tower on the hilly, leafy side of the enormous university campus, that would make a significant moral difference.

Fantasizing a note he'd leave for her affixed to the refrigerator door by one of those little dinosaur magnets he'd bought in a packet for the boy *Yes I love you I love you both but I have no heart for marrying you, the walls closing in on us. When I'm away from you I'm lonely for you but when I'm with you—I'm lonely for that part of myself that's somewhere else.* But he'd never do such a thing, he wasn't a cruel man except by accident.

The dream of the hurtling bicycle, the mysterious collision, came in early November. The following day Jack canceled a dinner engagement with Crista and another couple, despite Crista's extreme disappointment—she'd been planning this evening for weeks. Jack stayed home to work on a musical composition he'd begun, set aside in frustration, and forgotten a decade ago. It was a strange little piece scored for piano and strings, highly experimental, dissonant and lyric and meditative; neoclassic, but with startling juxtapositions and leaps inspired by Stravinsky and Varèse; an undercurrent of passionate yearning beneath. No one in this phase of his life even knew he'd once had a hope of writing music—"inventing music," he'd called it. It was his secret, or one of them.

Why Jack decided to work on this old, failed composition, he could not have said. So suddenly inspired, excited. *Yearning—for what?* It was almost a physical sensation, a hunger so extreme as to pass over into rapture. Working at the piano, emending his old composition and pushing ahead, he was so absorbed in the strange musical notes springing from his fingertips he glanced up to see with astonishment that it was nearly two A.M.—he'd been working for six hours virtually nonstop.

Outside, a wet-gusty November night. Leaves blown against the windows of his study like a fluttering of fingers.

How happy I am, and am meant to be.

* * *

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There came back to Jack Wells now, by degrees, as, at night, not every night nor with any reliable regularity but with consoling frequency, he dreamt of the brothers, a memory of how, as a boy, he'd felt a flamelike excitement when working on mathematical problems; playing piano, and for a while the cello, for which he'd had more feeling than aptitude; trying, in secret, to "invent" original music. He'd been embarrassed by his secret vanity, his conviction at certain incandescent moments *You are a born composer, your destiny is music* and somehow this was bound up with his talent for math, geometry. That remarkable ease with which, as a schoolboy, he'd been able to "solve" problems in his head which his teachers had had to work out on paper.

He'd known, and had not wanted to know. He'd known, and had repudiated the knowledge, as one might hide away in a drawer a gift of disturbing mystery.

As a small child Jack had been brightly inquisitive and persistent in his questions put to adults. *How much are all the numbers in the universe added up? Where does the sun go at night? Where are my dreams during the day? If God is in the sky, why can't we see Him with a telescope?* And as a high-school student, with his air of intense sceptical wonderment, *Why is Benedict Arnold a "traitor," and George Washington a "hero"? Why does the liver work the way it does, and not some other way? Why didn't parthenogenesis evolve as the most efficient means of reproduction?* He was far more intellectually curious than his brother Steven, though Steven always got high grades in school, too; he was nothing like his parents, who were sometimes proud of him but more often puzzled and annoyed by him. Mr. Wells was a low-level public schools administrator, Mrs. Wells a substitute junior-high-school teacher—they'd met at State Teachers' College in Albany and seemed to have married as a way of putting youth behind them. Jack resembled neither of them, he was sure. His most vivid memory was his father's counsel on the eve of Jack's high-school graduation, at which he was to deliver the valedictory speech—"Just don't make a fool of yourself, son!"

Jack had started piano lessons in junior high school, though the Wellses owned no piano; in senior high, inspired by a televised concert of Pablo Casals, he'd started cello lessons, so avid to learn the instrument, or to try, the school music teacher allowed him to use hers. Later, an adult, Jack had acquired a cello of his own, an exquisite instrument he remembered with feeling, like an old, long-lost lover, but at the time he'd never been serious about taking lessons

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and eventually he'd sold it. Nor had he been serious about "inventing" music. It became a weekend preoccupation, in time a hobby more contemplated than pursued. Jack's academic work intervened, his dutiful if uninspired citizenry as a member of a university community. He was a vain man and did not want to become one of those mathematicians of whom there are altogether too many characterized as *eccentric*.

His music was a candle flame flickering in his cupped hands and one day he happened to notice that the flame had gone out.

So with his mathematics. Highly promising in graduate school, winner of a prestigious fellowship, one of the more energetic younger professors at the first university at which he'd taught; then, by degrees, after a move to a less demanding university that brought with it promotion to associate professor and tenure, he'd let his research projects atrophy. Too much stress. Too much isolation. And always the risk of failure—*Just don't make a fool of yourself!* Jack found the routines of teaching, the superficial camaraderie of the academic life, the clockwork security of weeks, semesters, years sufficiently rewarding. Differential geometry, curves, surfaces, ghost-structures in three-dimensional space, the mind's very play in pursuit of "higher" knowledge—what was it but a hobby, intriguing and respectable as hobbies go; reasonably well-paying; reasonably secure; to be taken up, put down, taken up again like any hobby. Professor Wells was capable of performing in class, or in the company of his colleagues, like an "animated," "passionate" mathematician, which role he played purposefully from time to time. He was an actor playing his own old self, and he wondered, amused, if he wasn't more publicly effective as an actor than he'd been as that old self.

And there were women, a slow succession of women. Romances that shifted to friendships, with the passage of time. The compass direction of sexual feeling—could it be plotted? Jack supposed, in his case, it could. You move through points a, b, c . . . by the time you get to z, you aren't there any longer.

Fantasizing leaving on Crista's refrigerator door a note that had come to him in one of those waking dreams in which consciousness emerges and recedes and emerges again, where the daylight self touches fingertips with the nighttime self, *A family is a four-dimensional structure one plane of which is Time. A vector originating at a finite point but, since it curves into infinity, unchartable. Unknowable. Terrifying.*

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* * *

December, the week of the first heavy snowfall, he'd been working several nights in succession on his "Trio in C# minor" and dreaming intermittently of the brothers and his relations with Crista were courteous if strained and guarded *She knows there is someone else, something else: she's jealous* and he felt guilty, sorry for her and at the same time resentful and there came to him a dream of Damm suddenly at his left hand! and Vann suddenly at his right hand! as if springing out of the earth, wholly unexpected. "You are always new to me, no one can invent you," Jack said. The brothers laughed loudly, their eyes squinting up in merriment.

"John Michael!—a surprise for you."

"John Michael!—come with us."

Pulling roughly at him, hands gripping his, tight. He felt a moment's panic. As if he'd pushed his hands into a narrow space and now they were stuck.

"John Michael!—we love you so much—"

"—we have made a place to put you inside of us—"

Though he was dreaming and should not have been capable of such lucidity Jack felt such warmth, such joy thinking *It doesn't matter that they aren't real, nothing in the real world is like this.*

They brought Jack to a clearing in the snow in which there was a tunnel like a rabbit hole and on his hands and knees Jack crawled into it and now Damm and Vann were somehow beside him, or in him, or he was in them, the three of them pushing through the snow-tunnel butting with their heads. *If they abandon me I won't be able to find my way back.* But he felt only mild anxiety knowing *this is the truest way of happiness* and his trust in them was not misplaced for now they were in an open space, it seemed to be a room, overheated and airless and strangely lit as in the reflective, oscillating light of fireworks. There'd been a small boy crawling ahead squealing with excitement or alarm and now it was revealed that this boy was a brother, too—his face a vague sweet blur, his hair the color and texture of butterscotch. His name sounded like "Hänne"—"Hänn-eh"—a high vibrating syllable that rang in Jack's head.

"John Michael!—see who this is?"

"John Michael!—we've brought him here for a reason."

Jack asked, "What is the reason?" eager to know, but his question came out garbled, like snorting, hiccuping. Damm and Vann laughed even louder than before.

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"We thought he was the baby, but *you* are."

"John Michael!—why are you so—"

Cold, or *scared,* or *slow,* or—*old?* Jack was listening intensely yet could not hear. Even as, staring at Damm and Vann and now the boy Hänne who was about the size of an eight-year-old he could not seem to see their faces. *That is because they are inside your head, on the wrong side of your eyes.*

There was a fraction of a moment when Jack seemed to know he'd been in this place before. And Hänne was no surprise to him but someone he knew. And what was going to happen though he could not remember it.

It was expected that Jack stoop to kiss the little brother Hänne with whom he was now alone in this warm, airless cavity but he could not do it, his legs were twisted and his backbone stiff to the point of breaking. And his mouth so damned dry, that snorting-rattling in his throat. Damm and Vann were gone yet were watching and grinning lewdly through a kind of half-window, an old-fashioned dutch door. The strobelike lights pulsed weirdly in their eyes. They were—Jack was able to "see" them because he wasn't looking directly at them and they didn't think to disguise themselves—animated wooden figures, with astonishingly detailed, realistic features, liquidy eyes, thick dark eyelashes, glistening mouths—even their clothing was carved of wood, slick and shiny. At the same time they were thick-muscled high-school boys with blunt, handsome faces, about sixteen years old, the kind of boys who, in Jack Wells's high school, might have respected his intelligence but stared coolly through him as if, in his place, *no one at all had stood.* Except in gym class maybe where they'd expressed mild contempt for his tall skinny-puny body, his pigeon-sized muscles and weak eyes and the sullen-superior frown that was his defense.

But now it was, so delicious, "John Michael!—*we love you.*"

The littlest brother too loved Jack and now came giggling and rushing at him flailing his chubby baby arms in imitation of a bird—a hummingbird—aiming a wet kiss at Jack's mouth. But Jack panicked ducking and shielding his head with his arms and in a spasm of coughing woke dazed to find his legs twisted in damp bedclothes, his mouth agape in an enormous O, and his penis too enormous pulsing stiff with an erection that throbbed to the point of pain.

It was 6:20 A.M. A high whining wind outside. Pitch black, but the night's dreaming was over. In horror of touching himself Jack staggered from his bed.

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* * *

The week before Christmas, Jack's father had an accident driving his car, suffered minor injuries and had to be hospitalized and Jack went to visit him and saw by the look in his father's face, in and about the cringing eyes, that this was no longer the man Jack had known. Here was an ageing man, a badly frightened man, forcing a jaunty smile to ashy lips; trading wisecracks with the nurses to whom he introduced his "professor" son; insisting, "One minute the damned steering wheel was in my hand, the next—it wasn't." He blamed the icy pavement but Jack knew from his mother that he'd had a blackout, he'd simply lost consciousness and woke up in the hospital.

Fortunately, Jack's father's car had been moving at only about twenty miles an hour. It had swerved across several lanes of traffic, sideswiping another car and striking the rear of a motorcycle driven by a young man and coming to a jolting stop against a guard rail.

Jack asked, "Was the cyclist injured?"

"Well—" His mother's eyes were veiled. "—not badly."

"He wasn't killed, for God's sake, was he?"

"Why are you so excited?" Jack's mother asked, staring at him. She'd always been a nervous woman, quick to take offense; you risked insulting her by simply asking questions of the kind that must be asked. "No, certainly he was *not*. He was treated in the emergency room same as your father and *he* was released that same night."

Jack shut his eyes, feeling the *crack!* of the front wheel striking an invisible victim. But that was only a dream, and not at all like his father's experience, really.

"Why am I so excited?" he asked his mother quietly. "In matters of life and death, shouldn't we all be excited?"

And there was another incident at about that time, a spilling-over of his dreams of the brothers into real life, or a spilling-over of real life into his dreams of the brothers: in the university swimming pool where he hadn't swum for months, he was doing laps one frigid January morning when he sighted, padding across his line of vision, a stocky-muscled young man covered in darkish ape-fuzz, pink hose of a penis bobbing at his groin—an undergraduate football player who was the model, unmistakably, for Damm and Vann. Jack stared, appalled: *him?* It was a male-only hour at the pool and in this atmosphere of naked men the young football player, shouting

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to a friend and diving noisily into the pool, was the most truly *naked*.

Jack Wells swam on in his lane, fumbling, so stricken he swallowed a mouthful of water.

John Michael!—now you know.

And he noted too, one evening at Crista's when Lonnie in his pajamas was running in and out of the living room, squealing breathlessly hoping to avoid being put to bed by his mother—for Jack had been coming less frequently lately, there was tension in his presence—that the child's curly hair was the color of butterscotch. *Hänne—Lonnie?* Jack passed a hand over his eyes, laughing weakly. He must have looked as if he was about to get up and walk out, for Crista said sharply, "Lonnie, *stop.*" And to Jack, apologetically, "Jack, I'm sorry. It's past his bedtime and he knows better but—I guess—he's been missing you, and—"

"Well, I've been missing him," Jack said. This was true, or true enough. Lonnie approached him and Crista where they were sitting together, wineglasses in hand, and the boy's brown-amber eyes were wide in that way of a shy child's impetuosity and Jack felt his heart contract with an emotion sharp as pain. *Why don't you love me!* Lonnie demanded with those eyes *Why aren't you my daddy!*

Afterward, when they were alone, Crista asked, "Is there someone else?" quickly amending, in that way of hers that touched Jack deeply, it spoke of such instinctive solicitude for the other's position, "—unless you'd rather not talk about it with me." And Jack said, slowly, "No. No one." They were at the dining room table reluctant to shift into the next phase of the evening inevitable as a locomotive bearing down upon them—would they make love as they had not done in some time, would Jack stay the night—or would he, very shortly now, glance at his watch, make a comment about the time and his work waiting for him at home. And there was silence.

A long awkward moment of silence. Crista rested her hand on Jack's in sympathy. *Where I really am, and who I really am.* Almost, she seemed to know. To forgive, and to release. Outside, a light snowfall fine and gritty as sand was being blown against the windows; there was a humming or vibrating in the air, a teasing, nearly inaudible strain of music.

Crista said, "Jack, goodnight."

He was hunched at the piano. His eyes ached, and his hands. He'd lost track of the time *Which is how you know you are where you are*

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meant to be and that no other could be in your place. Outside his twelfth-floor window the nighttime city was an attenuated cobweb of lights. It was late, and very cold—the temperature hovering at zero degrees Fahrenheit. Good, nobody will interrupt. Even the wind had died down.

The "Trio in C# minor" emerged from his fingertips feverishly, but had to be continuously revised. For every movement forward there was a movement back. Some nights, the labor of the previous night, hours of finger-stretching chords, annotations, and revisions, was totally unraveled. *If I could just press forward, race to the end* but even in this heightened state of consciousness Jack was cautious, conservative. It filled him with a chill, subdued terror to think that he might not ever complete the composition. He would work, like this, night after night, week following week into infinity.

Already it was February. He'd arranged to take an unpaid leave of absence from the university, to the surprise of his colleagues and friends. Why? they asked. What are you working on that's so demanding? Or are you going to travel?—where? He told them nothing, he was alone much of the time.

He'd called Crista not long ago simply to be friendly, for he did miss her and the child, and Crista had been cool and curt saying she was fine and busy and, no, she couldn't put Lonnie on the phone—"He's too angry with you."

Jack wanted to say, "I'm angry with myself—" but the remark would have sounded facetious, insincere.

Damm laid a heavy, meaty hand on Jack's right shoulder, and Vann laid a heavy, meaty hand on Jack's left shoulder. The child Hänne was crouched nearby in his red pajamas, making a design in the snow with his hands. The butterscotch hair lifted in thick, hardened-syrupy tufts. There was something wrong with Hänne's left eye which Jack had never noticed before.

"John Michael!—you're an angry man."

"John Michael!—don't be a coward."

It was the first time the brothers had spoken quite so harshly to him and he recoiled with the hurt even as he wriggled his shoulders in such a way as to make himself smaller.

In recent dreams of the brothers Jack seemed to be full size—an adult man. He stood taller than his father had ever stood before his father had begun his downward shrinking, the farthest point of which was infinity. Yet, strangely, for all their shrewdness the brothers had no apparent knowledge that Jack Wells was a univer-

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sity professor, a mathematician. Nor did they know anything about his musical life *and so I have protected myself—haven't I?* He seemed to know that the brothers would have been bitterly jealous if they'd known of his other life.

"John Michael!—you don't lie to *us.*"

"John Michael!—you can't get away with that *here.*"

The threat they wielded was the threat of taking away their love for him. Even when the love was a warm golden liquid making his heart float he was fearful of its loss.

Hänne was running squealing and giggling in the snow and it was not clear if he was leading his brothers or whether his brothers, panting and lolling their tongues like wolves, were in pursuit. Suddenly there was excitement! danger! skidding descending the snowy-icy hill above Hubbard Street. A freight train was rattling close by, boxcar after boxcar ERIE CENTRAL RAILROAD ERIE CENTRAL RAILROAD and the noise was deafening vibrating inside Jack's head so hard his teeth chattered. They were in a forbidden place PRIVATE PROPERTY DANGER KEEP OUT having scaled the ten-foot chain-link fence and Jack was very frightened. And he understood he could not turn back.

Here has nothing to do with there. Once you climb the fence and jump down it doesn't matter where you came from.

The locomotive's whistle was a high-pitched shriek. Frantic as a hunted rabbit Hänne ran slipping in the snow in danger of falling beneath the train's wheels but when Jack reached out to grab him the older brothers jerked him back. "John Michael!—you have to choose."

"Choose what?" Jack asked. "Choose who?"

They were in the Erie Central Railroad yard but they were also in the L-shaped corner of Benjamin Franklin Elementary School. The noise of the train was also the noise of the wind blowing leaves and dirt into Jack's eyes. Jack saw Hänne's blunder but could not warn him *It's a corner! a trap!* for Damm and Vann gripped his shoulders too hard as running panicked from his enemies Hänne rushed into the corner and could not escape. His enemies who were the size of rabbits too, but large, vicious rabbits, knocked him down deftly and undid his corduroy trousers pulling them to his ankles and pulling down his underwear as well and rubbing dirt and dead leaves on his tender penis which shrank up inside him like a tiny turtle retracting its head. *Why do they hate me* Hänne was sobbing but the answer was *Oh no it's just play, it just happens to be you*

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in the corner. Damm and Vann knew better, however. They were laughing angrily in shame of their little brother who could not defend himself. Jack wanted to protest that when it had happened to him he'd learned to stay inside at recess and noon with other quiet children doing their homework in the cafeteria and amassing "extra credit" so at Parents' Day in June there was a row of shiny stars ★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★ beside John Michael Wells's name on the bulletin board far ahead of the next-nearest name.

Jack wanted to explain to Hänne who was sobbing *You won't remember the origin of those stars—I promise.*

Damm was shaking Jack's shoulder in disgust, "John Michael!—you'd better choose." And Vann shook Jack's shoulder even harder, as if hoping to dislocate it, "John Michael!—make up your mind."

The terrible locomotive was close behind them. Jack understood that he was to sacrifice one of the brothers, push him beneath the wheels, but he could not. "No, no please," he was pleading, "—don't make me, please—" He was paralyzed and his words too were stopped in his throat like great clots of phlegm. Damm and Vann were panting their harsh steamy breaths in his face saying, "Coward!—*choose*. Coward!—*choose*." But Jack was whimpering, his bladder threatened to spill, and in the manner of adolescent boys thrusting another from them in physical repugnance the older brothers shoved him so roughly he woke not at the piano (where with part of his delirious dreaming mind he'd believed himself to be) but fallen like a dead man across his bed. He was fully clothed, even his shoes on. Eyes burning in their sockets as if he'd been staring into a fierce light though his bedroom was darkened and absolutely still. *Choose! choose!* the voices were fading *coward, choose!* already the brothers' voices were fading into the wind against the windows, or into a locomotive's whistle miles away across the river, or into a child's nighttime fretting in the apartment above and though Jack sat up quickly, fully awake now and his senses alert as if he had narrowly escaped great danger, he heard nothing, no one.

How rapidly, how helplessly they were fading, the voices. And the luminous human figures. And the names of these figures. Receding to the size of a spark, a pinprick. Infinity. *What you must not remember, you won't be able to.* The brothers were gone and would not return but what that would mean, what Jack's life would be from now on, he had no idea. It had happened already, but he could not remember. ●

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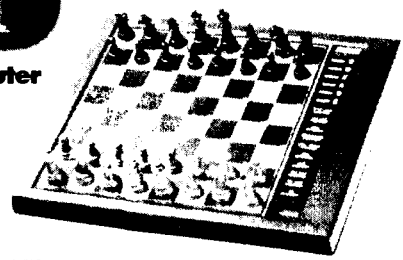

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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

As if Rochester, New York's Ed Hoch didn't have enough to do writing stories for EQMM *and editing his annual anthology* The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories, *this year he's taken on the chairmanship of both the Mystery Writers of America's Best Short Story Competition in the professional category, and the chairmanship of the Edgar Allan Poe Awards committee for best short story. By the time the year is out, Mr. Hoch will probably want a holiday as badly as his detective Rand does in the following story—only for Rand, of course, no holiday is complete without a mystery . . .*

WAITING FOR MRS. RYDER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a continuing fascination with the Indian Ocean and the east coast of Africa that led Rand to remain in Cairo after his wife returned to her spring semester of lectures at the University of Reading. "I want to spend a week or so on the islands off the coast," he told Leila. "Then I'll head back home."

"It's the rainy season there," she warned him. "They call it the Long Rains."

"I know. It comes and goes."

"Like some husbands."

Rand's destination was the island of Lamu off the coast of Kenya. He learned he could reach it by flying to an airstrip on Manda Island, only a couple of kilometers away, and taking a diesel-powered launch across the channel. He did exactly that on a Monday afternoon in late April, arriving in the middle of one of the Long

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Rains his wife had warned him about. Leila had studied archaeology in Egypt and traveled frequently in East Africa. He had wanted to bring her with him but her lecture schedule prevented it.

The motor ferry was waiting for him at the dock and by the time it had taken him and the other two passengers across the channel the rain had started to let up. "Damned nuisance," a stout man with a white moustache muttered. "Been coming here for ten years and the rain's always the same in the spring."

"Are you British?" Rand asked, though the accent didn't sound quite right to his ear.

"Australian, actually." He held out his hand. "James Count. I write travel books. Just now I'm updating our volume on East Africa. Lived a good bit in London, though. That's probably why you mistook me for British. You're a Brit, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Not many people come to Lamu in this season. You here on business?"

"No," Rand assured him with a smile. "I'm a retired civil servant. This is just a holiday for me."

"Do you have a hotel?"

"Someone back in Cairo recommended the Sunrise Guest House."

"That's a good place," James Count agreed, stroking his moustache. Rand guessed him to be in his fifties. "Especially in this humidity. The rooms have ceiling fans and mosquito netting."

"Sounds fine to me."

The third passenger on the motor launch was a man in a white Muslim cap and full-length white robe, carrying a closed umbrella against the vagaries of the weather. He did not speak, and Rand suspected he did not understand English. When the ferry docked on the Lamu side of the channel he was the first one off.

"The Sunrise is at the top of this street," James Count told Rand as they came off the jetty. "After you pass through customs go up to the fort and turn right. You'll see it there."

Rand found the place without difficulty and booked a room for three nights. It seemed like a clean, well-run guesthouse with a good view of the harbor. A sign in the reception area informed him that drugs and spirits were prohibited and prostitutes and homosexuals were not allowed in the rooms.

He turned on the overhead fan as he unpacked his single suitcase. Then, seeing a bug in one of the bureau drawers, he decided to leave most of his clothing in the suitcase after all. The shuttered windows

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opened wide to the afternoon breeze off the Indian Ocean. It was a pleasant place despite the bugs and the humidity. Leila would have liked it.

When it was time for dinner he went off along the ancient, narrow lanes in search of a likely restaurant. He passed several Africans and white-clad Muslims on the way, some leading donkeys and carts. Private motor vehicles were not allowed on the island and donkey carts were obviously a common form of transportation. The white-walled fort with its battlements, nearly two centuries old, had been used as a prison through most of the current century, according to a brochure Rand had picked up in the guesthouse reception area. It was closed now while being converted into a museum.

There were women in the narrow lanes along with the men and he was surprised to see that they wore the traditional black wrap-around garments without the usual Muslim face veil. He was even more surprised at the cafe he chose for dining to find a pair of waitresses serving the food. His waitress was named Onyx, a brown-skinned woman with western features, possibly in her forties. She spoke fair English, enough to understand his order.

"Bring me a bottle of beer, too," he said after ordering his food.

"We have Tusker, a local beer."

"That's fine."

"Chilled or warm?" When she saw his expression of distaste she explained, "Most Africans like it warm."

"Not me. Chilled will be fine."

The food was passable and the tables were mostly filled by the time Rand finished eating. He was thinking of phoning Leila back in Reading when he thought he spotted a familiar face at a corner table. Walking over there on his way out, he saw that he was correct.

"George Ryder, isn't it? I'm Jeffrey Rand. We met in London some years ago." He kept his voice low, though the next table was empty.

Ryder was a handsome gray-haired man in his early fifties. He'd been a decade younger when Rand met him in the offices of Concealed Communications, overlooking the Thames. Rand was already retired from British Intelligence by that time, but Ryder was still quite active in the American CIA.

He looked up from his food and smiled. "You must be mistaken. My name is Watkins."

"Pardon me." Rand continued on his way out of the cafe. If George Ryder was in Lamu on an assignment, he had violated a cardinal rule of espionage in calling him by his real name. Still, Ryder had

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never been a case agent to his knowledge. He sat at a desk in Langley, Virginia, and shuffled papers around.

Rand thought about it as he strolled around the town, taking in the waterfront and its surprising sights. One of the most unexpected was the large number of dhows, small sailing vessels used by Arab traders. Rand had seen them before on the Arabian and Indian coasts, but never in such profusion. Staring at them in the twilight as they rode at anchor close to shore, he was not aware of the white-robed Muslim until he spoke. "The dhows are built and prepared at nearby villages. That is why there are so many here."

Rand recognized the man who'd been on the ferry that afternoon. This time he carried no umbrella. "Do you live here?" he asked.

The man nodded. "I am Amin Shade. I buy and sell these boats."

Rand introduced himself and they shook hands. "This is an unusual place, more Arab than African."

"It has a long history as an isle of fantasy and romance. It is both remote and unique, which is why it attracted your so-called hippies in the early nineteen seventies."

Rand was staring out at the boats. "I'd like to ride in a dhow," he decided, admiring the sleek craft with their distinctive sails.

"That is easily arranged. Tomorrow morning I must sail to Matondoni, one of the villages where they are built. I would be pleased to have you as a companion."

"That's very kind of you," Rand murmured. "What time do you leave?"

"Around ten o'clock," Amin Shade replied. "It is well to travel before the heat of the day, though the journey is brief. I will conduct my business, we will have a barbecued fish lunch, and return in the afternoon. I will meet you right here at ten. And bring an umbrella. It is sure to rain."

Rand left him and continued along the shore. The people of the island certainly seemed friendly enough. After a time he left the shore and headed back north, the way he had come. Almost at once he heard the laughter of a young woman and somehow knew she was British. Hurrying along the street he caught up with her and saw that she was accompanied by James Count, the travel writer who'd been his other ferry companion.

"Rand, for God's sake!" Count put a heavy arm around his shoulders and Rand could smell the beer on his breath. "Laura, this is the British chap I told you about. Laura Peters, Jeffrey Rand."

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She was much younger than Count, probably still in her twenties, with the fresh attractiveness of an outdoor person. "Hello, Jeffrey Rand. You must come with us! I'm taking my uncle to see where I work."

"Your uncle?"

"Don't you think we look alike?" she asked mischievously. "If I had that moustache we'd be dead ringers!"

"Where are you two taking me?" Rand demanded with a smile.

"To something you've never seen before," she assured him, starting down the narrow lane toward the waterfront. "The Donkey Sanctuary!"

Even before they reached it the braying of the animals could be heard. If Rand had thought she was jesting he was proven wrong by the first sight of pens filled with injured, sick, and tired donkeys. "What is this? Do you round them up off the streets, Miss Peters?"

"They are brought here by their owners or we find them ourselves. We offer rest and protection until they are well."

"But whom do you work for? Who pays you for this?"

"The International Donkey Protection Trust of Sidmouth, Devon. I've been working for them the better part of a year and there's nothing like it."

"I don't imagine there is," Rand agreed.

She showed them around the place. The donkeys were interesting, but when Rand spotted a copy of the London *Times* in her small office he was more interested in that. "I haven't seen one in weeks," he admitted.

"Take it!" Laura said. "I'm finished with it. They fly them in every week with my supplies. If you don't mind reading week-old news—"

He folded it and stuck it under his arm. "Not at all. Thank you. Can I buy you people a beer or something?"

"A capital idea!" James Count agreed. "I've already had a few but there's always room for one or two more."

"Where shall we go?" his niece asked.

Count made a face. "Only place in Lamu that serves cold beer is the Harmony Cafe. It's just a few blocks away."

"I know it," Rand told them. "I ate dinner there."

They paused at the outdoor pens while Laura petted some of her favorite donkeys, then left the Sanctuary to set off for the cafe. When they reached it Rand was pleased to see that the man who denied being George Ryder was no longer present. The owner of the place, a fat Arab named Hegad, was going over the menu with Onyx,

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the waitress who'd served Rand earlier. "On Tuesday evenings we serve special Indian dishes," he told her. "Some traders sail up from Zanzibar for them."

Somehow the thought of dhows docked by the jetty at Lamu like yachts on the Thames was more than Rand could imagine, but until an hour ago he'd never imagined a Donkey Sanctuary. The three of them chose a table near the door and Onyx came over to take their order. It was past the dinner hour, with only one other table occupied.

"Just beer," Count told her. "Three cold Tuskers."

Onyx went off to fill the order and Rand asked about the local economy. "What does one do for a living on Lamu?"

Laura Peters grinned. "Tend to the donkeys. Seriously, though, there is dhow building and repairing in the villages, and fabulous tourism at the right times of the year. Shela, a village south of here, has a magnificent beach. All of that brings in money. The local police will tell you illegal currency exchange is a thriving business too, but I think they exaggerate."

Over the second beer James Count and his niece turned their conversation to family matters and gossip about relatives in England and Australia. Rand glanced at the front page of the *Times,* skimming an article on the royal family. That was when his eye fell on an item at the bottom of the page. The headline read: *CIA Official Charged in Espionage Case.*

Rand quickly read the news report out of Washington: "George Ryder, longtime CIA bureau chief, and his wife Martha were both indicted on multiple counts of espionage by a federal grand jury. They are assumed to have fled the country and a worldwide search is under way. It is believed that Ryder and his wife were paid more than two million dollars over the past decade to supply CIA secrets to Moscow."

Rand lifted his eyes from the page and found himself staring at the empty table where George Ryder had been seated just a few hours earlier.

On the way back to the Sunrise Guest House Rand pondered the trick of fate that had brought him together with George Ryder at this remote outpost of civilization. They'd hardly known each other, and in truth Ryder might not even remember him. Now he was a wanted man, and Rand since his retirement was something of an unwanted man.

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At the Sunrise, Rand climbed the stairs to his second-floor room and inserted the key in the lock. As he entered the darkened room he was aware of the slight swish of the ceiling fan above his head. He'd turned it off when he went out. He dropped quickly and quietly to the floor, knowing it was already too late. The red line of a laser gunsight had split the darkness and targeted the wall next to his head.

"Can't we talk about this?" Rand asked. There was a muffled sound like a dry cough and a bullet thudded into the wall above him. He slid forward under the bed, yanking off his shoe, throwing it against the side wall. The laser beam followed it, just for an instant, and Rand was out the other side of the bed, ripping the mosquito netting from its fastenings and wrapping it around the gunman before he could fire again.

He picked up the fallen gun, an awkward thing with its laser sight and silenced barrel. "Who did you expect to kill with this, Ryder? I'm retired but I'm not crippled. How'd you find me?"

"I followed you from the ferry this afternoon."

"One thing to remember, no matter how hot it gets you never turn on the ceiling fan when you're waiting in the dark to kill someone."

"Give me back the gun and we'll forget about this. It was a mistake."

"And you made it. I read your press notices in the London *Times*. I gather the Russians paid quite well."

He sighed and glared at Rand. "So you know what they're saying."

"I assume it's true, since you took a shot at me. I didn't come here looking for you, Ryder. I'm retired from British Intelligence and I certainly have no connection with your CIA."

"Then what are you doing on Lamu?"

Rand relaxed his grip on the mosquito netting but kept holding the pistol. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I was curious about the area. An American writer, Walter Satterthwait, called Lamu the most beautiful place he'd ever seen in his life. What are *you* doing here?"

"Waiting for my wife. She was supposed to meet me three days ago."

"An odd place to meet, not exactly like Waterloo Bridge or the top of the Empire State Building."

"We were here together once, years ago. Its very remoteness made it the perfect meeting place."

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"And it's on the way to Russia."

"I doubt we'll be going there. Frankly, I don't know where we'll be going." He turned his gaze on Rand, his face momentarily bathed in moonlight through the window. "Are you planning to turn me in?"

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't? If the reports are correct the Russians paid you more than I earned in my entire career with Concealed Communications. How did you and your wife get into it, anyway?"

George Ryder shifted uneasily. "If we're going to chat, I wish you'd remove this netting you've got me tangled in."

Rand turned on the light and closed the window shutters. Then he allowed Ryder to unwrap himself. "No tricks, or I'll see how this gun of yours works."

"No tricks," the CIA man promised. He sat in the room's only chair, a white wicker thing that looked uncomfortable. Rand remained seated on the bed. "Martha and I met when we were in college," he began. "I was in a play and she helped with the makeup. We started going out and were married soon after graduation. I was taking a pre-law course but in my senior year I was recruited by the CIA. We moved to Washington and took up with other young couples in government service. I like to think we were popular then. People kidded us about being George and Martha, like Washington and his wife. The nineteen seventies were a glorious time. I was advancing at the company and Martha had a nice job at a travel agency. Then came the eighties."

"What happened?" Rand asked quietly.

"I don't know. Maybe we were bored with our lives. Maybe it was simply like that spy in an Eric Ambler novel. We needed the money."

"What were you giving them for it?"

"The names of Russian double agents. I never betrayed an American."

"And your wife?"

"Martha used her position at the travel agency to arrange side trips for me. When I was out of the country on company business I'd hop over to a nearby city or country and meet with my Russian contact. That's how I delivered the material and how I was paid. The money went into a Swiss account in Martha's name, and she drew from it as we needed it."

"They never suspected you?"

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"Oh, sure. I was routinely questioned a few times, especially during the great mole hunt of the mid-eighties. But things always quieted down. I managed to satisfy them and even passed the polygraph tests."

"Now you've been indicted."

He stood up and Rand shifted his grip on the pistol. "I'm being frank with you because we're in the same business, Rand. Or we were. Maybe you can understand how it is these days, with the Cold War over and the superpowers at peace with one another. Do you want to know how Martha and I managed to escape? The only close friend I still had in the company phoned me at a hotel two weeks ago and tipped me off. He said they'd been watching me and tapping my home phone for the past year. When I returned home Martha and I would both be arrested."

"What did you do?"

"I sent a fax to Martha's travel agency, tipping her off in a prearranged code. She dispatched a ticket to Lamu, with a message that she'd join me here."

"How do you think the CIA found out about you?"

"That's the damnedest part of all. My friend said my name came down a year ago from the highest level. It just took them twelve months to prove the charges were true."

"The highest level?"

"No one will admit it. Maybe fifty years from now when the top-secret files are declassified, historians will learn about it. By that time it won't matter to anyone, especially not Martha and me. Remember what happened about a year ago? A new president of the United States met with a new president of Russia who was desperately seeking aid. The Cold War was over. Our president wanted a new beginning and the Russian president owed nothing to the former Soviet government. He owed nothing to the crumbling KGB."

"What are you telling me?" Rand asked.

"I can't prove it, but I know what happened. They held a brief private meeting without even their advisors present. The Russian president made a final appeal for more aid, and my president asked, 'What can you give me in return as a gesture of good faith?' and the Russian said, 'I can give you the name of the top Soviet agent in the CIA,' and he slipped a piece of paper across the table—a paper with my name on it."

"You really think that happened?"

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"It happened. The word came down to start an intensive investigation. It took them a year, but they finally nailed me. And Martha."

"If she's not here yet she may not be coming."

"I'll wait awhile longer. Every day when the ferry comes in from the airstrip I watch for the new arrivals. I saw you today, of course, but I hoped you wouldn't run into me, or remember me. I hoped you weren't the one sent to bring me in."

"They'll only know where you are if they have Martha."

"Yes. I'm betting she's still free and on her way here by some sort of roundabout route. If anyone can shake them Martha can."

"And meanwhile you wait, and try to kill people like me. If there is an enemy here, Ryder, it could be anyone. It could be an Arab leading his donkey through the narrow lanes, or a trader sailing in on his dhow."

"I know that."

"You'll be running the rest of your life. That's why you're reluctant to go to Russia, isn't it? It's because you think the Russians betrayed you."

"I'm going," he said. "Give me back my gun."

Rand emptied the magazine onto the bedspread and cleared the chamber of the final round. Then he passed the weapon to George Ryder. "You may need it, but not against me." He returned the bullets too.

The American stuck the weapon in his belt, beneath his shirt, and left the room.

In the morning it was raining, a sudden downpour that woke Rand from a troubled sleep. He shaved and dressed and went out, borrowing one of the black umbrellas the guesthouse management kept in a stand by the front door. Although the Sunrise Guest House provided morning tea, he decided to walk to the Harmony Cafe for a full breakfast. The rain was still falling as he reached his destination and he left his umbrella inside the door. The waitress Onyx was not yet on duty but Hegad, the owner, was waiting on customers. Rand ordered banana pancakes with honey and a cup of tea. The pancakes were quite tasty but the tea was far too milky and sweet for his taste. He finally settled for a Coke.

"Has the American gentleman been around this morning?" he asked Hegad.

The fat Arab shook his head. "No Americans today. They wait for the rain to stop."

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A few others drifted in and finally the waitress arrived, leaving her umbrella with the others. "You are back again," she said with a chuckle. "Does our food deserve a second or third chance?"

"This was my first time for breakfast. Those pancakes are quite good."

Onyx cast an eye on Hegad. "Sometimes he lets me make them. They are even better."

The rain was finally stopping and Rand remembered his ten o'clock appointment with Amin Shade at the dhows. He would worry about George Ryder later. He paid his bill and picked up the umbrella by the door. The humidity outside was high as the sun broke through the clouds and water vapor rose from the puddles along the lanes.

It was just before ten when he reached the mooring area for the dhows, south of the jetty. There was no sign of Shade, but he was surprised to see Laura Peters tugging on the reins of a recalcitrant donkey. She was trying, without great success, to urge him north along the shore to her Sanctuary a few hundred meters away.

"Need some help?" he asked.

"A great deal, Mr. Rand. This creature just doesn't realize what I'm doing is for its own good! Could you give me a hand, push from the rear while I pull?"

He put down the umbrella and got into position. "It's not every day I get to push donkeys."

But it seemed to work, and the beast was soon in motion without even a parting kick. "Thank you!" she called back to him. "I'll give you a job any time you need one!"

He laughed and waved, turning back to the mooring area. There was still no sign of Amin Shade. Finally he asked an old man who seemed to be in charge of renting the dhows, "Has Amin Shade been here this morning?"

The man peered at the boats bobbing on the water. "He is out there on his vessel. He waits for you."

The dhow he indicated was moored about fifty meters offshore. Rand could see a white-robed figure hunched over one of the two masts, but there was no rowboat riding alongside. He borrowed one from the old man and rowed himself out to meet Shade.

"Did you forget your invitation?" he asked as he pulled alongside and climbed over the railing.

The figure at the mast didn't move. It was indeed Amin Shade, but he wouldn't be traveling to Shela or anywhere else. He appeared

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to have been shot once in the throat. There was a great deal of blood all around, attracting flies, and Rand could see that he was dead.

Before summoning help, he looked closely at the deck in front of the sagging body. Shade had not died instantly from the neck wound. He'd lived long enough to print a half-dozen letters in his own blood. *CAMERI,* it said, or possibly the final *A* was incomplete and it was meant to read *CAMERA*.

Rand searched around for a camera but there was none on the vessel. In fact there was nothing at all that might have belonged to Amin Shade. If he'd had anything with him, the killer had taken it. Although the deck was wet from the morning rain it had not washed away the man's dying word. That meant he'd been alive during the last twenty minutes, after the rain had stopped, though the shooting could have been earlier.

Rand rowed back to shore and told the old man what he'd found. "Amin Shade is dead. We must call the police." The man's eyes widened. "Did you hear a shot while you were here?"

"No, no shot! He go out to the boat with another Arab."

"Did you see the man's face?"

A shake of the head. "Raining. Shade covered the other with his umbrella. I went inside and did not see the other man row away."

Presently, as word spread and a crowd gathered on the shore, the district commissioner arrived—a towering black man wearing portions of a military uniform and driving a Land Rover, the only motor vehicle allowed on the island. He listened intently to Rand's story and noted down his name and address in Lamu. "We will talk to you further," he promised in perfect English. "Do not leave the island."

That afternoon when the ferry arrived from the airstrip on the adjoining island, he found George Ryder standing in a nearby lane watching the new arrivals. Rand could see that Martha Ryder was not among them. "Hello, Ryder," he said. "Do you still have the gun?"

The American looked at him distastefully. "Are you planning a bit of blackmail, Rand?"

"No. Someone was killed today, possibly with a silenced pistol. No shot was heard. Can you imagine two silenced pistols in a place like Lamu?"

"I can imagine ten silenced pistols if I put my mind to it. I had nothing to do with any killing. I don't even know who died."

"An Arab named Amin Shade who bought and sold dhows."

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"The name means nothing to me."

"If you were watching yesterday's ferry, he got off with that travel writer and me. He was wearing a white robe and cap, carrying a furled umbrella."

"I may have noticed him but I didn't know him."

"Has there been any word from your wife?"

"None. I am beginning to fear she's been arrested. She would be here by now otherwise." He started to turn away.

"Do you know anything about a camera?"

The American shrugged. "Tourists and spies always carry them. Sometimes the tourists have more expensive cameras than the spies."

Rand watched him walk away. Then he went back to the Sunrise Guest House and dug the bullet out of the wall of his room.

The district commissioner was named Captain Chegga and he remembered Rand from their morning encounter at the scene of Shade's murder. He used a small room at the post office when official business summoned him to Lamu, and in the confined space he seemed hemmed in and uncomfortable. "It's much too humid here on the coast," he grumbled. "Do you have more information about the killing of Mr. Shade?"

"Perhaps," Rand answered. He took an envelope from his pocket and removed the bullet from it. "You might try matching this with the slug that killed him. I assume it was recovered?"

"It will be. There was no exit wound. Where did this come from?"

"First tell me if it came from the same gun that killed Shade."

The district commissioner smiled sadly. "There are no facilities here in Lamu. The bullets must be sent to the mainland."

"How long will that take? A few hours?"

"Ah, you Englishmen! You expect everything to happen instantly."

"How long?"

"Twenty-four hours, at the very least. It will be morning before the bullets arrive for comparison, and afternoon before I receive a report, even by telephone."

"I'll come back then. Meanwhile, what about Shade's background? Was he involved in anything—"

"Shady?" Captain Chegga laughed at his own humor. "We are looking into it, never fear. Go now, Mr. Rand, and enjoy your vacation. Or whatever it is that has brought you to Lamu."

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James Count was having a beer at the Harmony Cafe when Rand arrived there. "The only place you can get a cold one," he said, holding up his bottle of Tusker. "Come join me."

"How's the travel book going?" Rand asked, pulling out a chair for himself.

"Revisions, revisions. Even places like Lamu never stay quite the same. The guesthouses and cafes must be reevaluated, the prices adjusted."

Rand told him about encountering Laura with the balky donkey that morning. "It was just before I found that dead Arab, Amin Shade."

"I heard about that," the Australian said. "Crimes against tourists are usually limited to confidence games or muggings." He signaled to Onyx and she brought them two more cold beers. "But then Shade was not a tourist."

"Might he have been a smuggler?"

"Anything is possible."

Rand saw the body again, lying in its pool of blood on the deck of the dhow. In his mind's eye he was trying to see something else, something that wasn't there—

"They say the killer was dressed like an Arab, in white robe and cap—*khanzus* and *kofia,* I guess they're called."

"That proves nothing," Count said.

"No, I suppose not." Rand thought of something else. "Is the ferry the only way onto this island?"

"Well, yes, but there are three ferries from various points on Manda Island, where the airstrip is, and another from the mainland. In addition, of course, there are always private dhows for hire."

In the end Rand was no closer to learning anything than he'd been before. He declined Count's invitation to dinner, deciding he needed to be by himself. His long conversation with George Ryder the previous night had cut drastically into his sleeping time and he was beginning to feel the effects of it. He went back to his room and put in a call to Leila, trying not to alarm her with too much detail about the journey.

"It's beautiful here," he said. "A little paradise."

"Will you be home soon?"

"I'm only booked here for three nights. We'll see what happens then."

He thought about telling someone in London or Washington about George Ryder's presence in Lamu but decided against it. He was

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beginning to suspect that too many people knew about it already.

Rand spent Wednesday morning exploring the quaint little shops of the island, choosing a gift for his wife from among the native crafts and imported Asian items. In the afternoon he encountered George Ryder again, down by the ferry dock. James Count had told Rand that boats arrived at different times of the day, but obviously it was the ferry airline connection that interested Ryder. Today the plane had brought no one at all. The ferry carried only a man from the neighboring island with two donkeys to sell.

"No word from her yet?" Rand asked the American.

"Nothing. If they have arrested her they will be coming for me next." He glanced nervously at Rand. "You seem to be keeping an eye on me."

"You tried to kill me two nights ago," Rand reminded him. "That makes us practically brothers."

"If they come for me, could I look to my brother for help?"

In that instant Rand almost felt sorry for the man. He didn't answer directly, only asked, "Where are you staying?"

"Yumbe House, a hotel at the north end of town, a few blocks inland from the Donkey Sanctuary."

"I'll find it." The safest place for George Ryder might be a jail cell, but he didn't tell him that.

After they parted Rand left the jetty and walked to the nearby post office. Captain Chegga was in his office, relaxing beneath the slowly turning ceiling fan. "It is Mr. Rand, isn't it?"

"That's right. I came to see you yesterday. I brought you a bullet."

"I remember."

"Does it match the bullet that killed Amin Shade?"

"Yes, the bullets match, but it appears that the body does not match. The real Amin Shade is alive and well on Zanzibar."

"Then who—?"

"The dead man was an Italian ex-convict named Giacomo Verdi, a confidence man and occasional government informer. He had been known to indulge in blackmail in the past. He may have tried it again. Apparently he assumed Shade's identity to help pull off some sort of swindle involving the sale of used dhows."

"Then he wasn't an Arab at all?"

"No, no." Captain Chegga played with the papers on his desk. "Now if you will please tell me where you obtained that bullet—"

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"It was fired at me two nights ago by a sneak thief I discovered in my room at the Sunrise Guest House. He escaped before I could raise the alarm, and since he took nothing I didn't report it. That was the bullet I dug out of the wall."

"Interesting. The thief could have been an accomplice of Verdi's. They may have had a falling-out."

Suddenly the rain was back, with drops dancing against the windows of the little office. They reminded Rand of what he'd forgotten earlier. "Did you find Shade's umbrella anywhere?"

"It was onshore. His initials were on the handle. He must have left it there when he rowed out to the dhow."

"And now I find myself without one," Rand said, looking out at the rain.

"It never lasts long, but you may borrow one of mine if you wish. I'm sure I'll be seeing you again, Mr. Rand." It sounded more like a threat than a promise.

The district commissioner had been right. The rain stopped within five minutes and Rand closed the borrowed umbrella. Up ahead he saw the man with the two donkeys who'd been aboard the ferry. He'd been joined now by James Count's niece from the Donkey Sanctuary, who was attempting to examine the animals.

"Need any help pushing?" Rand asked with a smile.

"No, but I'm trying to tell this man these animals are sick. I want to treat them at my place before he sells them."

There was more talk in a language Rand did not understand, then Laura Peters seemed to end the discussion by taking a small camera from the pocket of her jeans and snapping a picture of the donkeys' heads. The trader was furious, trying to grab it from her, but Rand intervened. Finally he relented, and Laura smiled as she put away the camera and took hold of the donkeys' reins.

"Thank you for your help once again!" she told Rand. She set off toward the Sanctuary with the trader following meekly along.

Rand smiled and went on his way. He'd almost reached the Sunrise Guest House when an African man wearing a uniform similar to the district commissioner's appeared from a side lane to intercept him. "Mr. Rand, Captain Chegga wishes to see you."

"I just saw him less than an hour ago. Is he worried about getting his umbrella back?"

The officer did not smile. "You will come with me."

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Rand saw that he had no choice, and he fell into step beside the man. "Where are we going? Back to the post office?"

"To Yumbe House."

Rand recognized the name. It was the hotel where George Ryder was staying. He asked no more questions. It was a five-minute walk through the narrow lanes, and when they reached the little hotel the district commissioner's Land Rover was parked in front. They went up to the second floor where Captain Chegga was standing grim-faced with several others in the hall outside an open door.

"May I go in?" Rand asked.

The commissioner nodded. "Touch nothing. We are waiting for the photographer."

George Ryder was seated in a chair by the window. There was a bullet hole in his right temple and the gun was lying on the floor beneath his right hand, minus its silencer and laser scope. "Did anyone hear the shot?" Rand asked.

"No one. The maid found him. When did you last see Mr. Ryder?"

Rand knew the question was a trick. He'd never mentioned Ryder to the commissioner, but anyone might have seen them conversing at the jetty. "Just before I stopped at your office. He was meeting the ferry from the airstrip."

"Was there someone he knew on it?"

"No, only a trader with a pair of sick donkeys. The woman from the Sanctuary has them now."

"Do you have any ideas about this?" Captain Chegga asked, gesturing towards the body in the chair.

"Just one. It wasn't suicide."

"How so?"

"This place has thin walls, yet no one heard a shot. If you'll look closely at the barrel of that gun you'll see scratch marks where a silencer was attached. If he shot himself with a silenced gun, where's the silencer? Without the silencer this gun would have made more noise and left more powder burns around the wound."

Chegga was impressed. "You have done some detective work back in England, Mr. Rand."

"Not this sort. A bit of work with codes, but I suppose in a way it's all the same."

"Do you know who killed him and the other one?"

"Yes." He did know, now that it was too late.

"Will you tell me?"

"Suppose we discuss it over dinner tonight, Captain."

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"Where would you suggest?"

"The only place in Lamu that serves cold beer."

Rand was not surprised to see James Count and his niece Laura at one of the tables when they entered the Harmony Cafe a couple of hours later. The owner, Hegad, hurried over to take their order, obviously a bit intimidated at having the district commissioner as a customer. Rand waved to Count and Laura and ordered a Tusker. Captain Chegga chose a glass of wine.

"I have spent too much time in Lamu," the captain complained. "There are duties on the mainland."

"I was told nothing happens in a hurry here."

"That is part of Lamu's charm," Chegga agreed. "But it can be carried too far. Will you tell me what you know?"

"All in good time."

The beer tasted fine. Rand ordered from the chalked menu on the wall, choosing a beef dish as the safest. The captain ordered mutton. Onyx served them both in a reasonable time and Rand could see Hegad relax behind his cash register. "Now will you tell me?" the captain asked.

Rand nodded. "I think the time has come."

Onyx had cleared the table of dishes and returned with the check. That was when Rand gripped her wrist and held it tight. "What is this?" she asked.

"Captain Chegga, let me introduce you to the killer of Amin Shade and George Ryder—the elusive Mrs. Ryder."

Later, back at the little room in the post office, Rand told Captain Chegga, "There were at least five clues pointing to Onyx as Mrs. Ryder and the double killer of Shade and Ryder. For dramatic effect I might call them the clues of the borrowed gun, the wrong umbrella, the dangerous rain, the menu lesson, and the dying message."

"I think you Englishmen sometimes read too much of Sherlock Holmes, but go on."

"First, the borrowed gun. We established through the bullet comparison that Amin Shade, whatever his true name, was killed by George Ryder's gun. He'd tried to use it on me less than twelve hours earlier, and it was back at his side this afternoon. Conclusion: either Ryder killed Shade and then himself or he loaned the weapon to someone else. Since I'd shown that he didn't kill himself, we can conclude that he loaned the weapon to someone. Obviously that

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would have to be someone very close. Martha Ryder, as his co-conspirator, was the most likely person."

The commissioner grunted. "Except that she wasn't yet here on the island."

"I had only his word for that, the word of a spy and traitor. He had a very good reason for keeping her presence on the island a secret. If I or someone else had come here to arrest him for extradition back to America, we'd be most likely to wait until Martha Ryder arrived too. So long as he went through the daily charade of waiting for her at the ferry dock, he was safe."

"Go on."

"The clue of the wrong umbrella. I had an umbrella with me yesterday morning. I left it by the door at the Harmony Cafe where I had breakfast. While I was there the waitress Onyx came in with another umbrella and left it by the door. I took an umbrella, thinking it was mine, when I left and went down to the dhow moorings to meet Amin Shade. I left the umbrella on shore to row out to his vessel and discover the body. The man who rents the dhows told me Shade was carrying an umbrella when he went out to his vessel, obscuring the face of his companion. Yet there was no umbrella on the dhow. There was nothing belonging to Shade. Obviously the killer took it as protection against the rain. You told me you found it on shore, with his initials on the handle. Had the killer left it there? No, the umbrella would have provided virtually no protection while he was rowing the boat to shore. It was taken because it was needed after landing, so it would not have been left on shore. I brought it there myself, because I picked up the wrong umbrella at the Harmony Cafe—the umbrella Onyx brought in with her."

"But how could Onyx be Martha Ryder? Her skin color—"

"Which brings us to the clue of the dangerous rain. Why was an umbrella so necessary to the killer? Because the rain was dangerous. It would cause her body makeup to run! Ryder told me earlier he met his wife while performing in a college play for which she helped with the makeup. She used body makeup to give herself a brown skin and a perfect disguise. Onyx was not young, remember. Even in her makeup she was clearly middle-aged, with Western features. Something else—my clue of the menu lesson. Monday at the Harmony Cafe I overheard the owner explaining to Onyx that they featured special Indian dishes on Tuesday nights. The implication was that Onyx had been employed at the Harmony for less than a week."

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"She was new," the commissioner confirmed. "But your final clue, the dying message—"

"*CAMERI*. I thought he was trying to write *camera* until you told me that Shade wasn't Shade but an Italian confidence man named Verdi. In his dying moments he reverted to his native tongue. He was trying to write *CAMERIERA*, the Italian word for waitress. Because she was new, he didn't know the name she was using. He only knew that Martha Ryder was posing as a waitress, and when he tried to blackmail her, she took her husband's silenced pistol and shot him."

"Why would she kill Ryder?"

"There could only be one reason. When he escaped arrest his continued freedom was too embarrassing for the governments involved."

Rand went to the jetty a bit later when the commissioner and his Land Rover were leaving the island. He watched while Martha Ryder was led to the ferry in handcuffs. With the makeup gone she seemed simply a lonely middle-aged woman. He walked over to meet her and said, "Tell me one thing, Mrs. Ryder. Which side paid you to kill your husband?"

She stared at him for an instant before replying. "Does it really matter? It's all politics."

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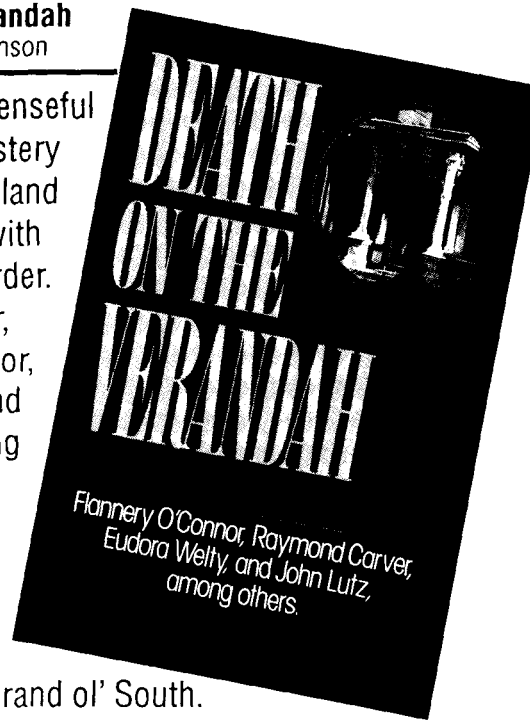
SUDDEN MURDER IN THE SULTRY SOUTH

Death on the Verandah
Edited by Cynthia Manson

This tense, suspenseful collection of mystery stories from the land of Dixie sizzles with intrigue and murder. Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and John Lutz, among others, provide gripping tales of villainous intent cloaked in the gentility and tradition of the grand ol' South.



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a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

No one is more adept at displaying the disintegration of a personality than Britain's master of psychological suspense, Ruth Rendell. That she can do so in as few words as she employs here is one of the marks of her genius . . .

SHREDS AND SLIVERS

by RUTH RENDELL

I love my love with a ps because she is psychic; I hate her with a ps because she is psilotic. I feed her psalliota and psilotaceae; her name is Psammis and she lives in a psalterium.

Forgive me. I am carried away by words sometimes, especially those of Greek etymology that begin with a combination of unlikely consonants. I love my love with a cn because she is cnidarian . . . But, no. Let us return to psalliota. If you want to know what all those other words mean you must look them up in a good dictionary. Psalliota is nothing more nor less than the common mushroom: psalliota campestris, to be precise.

I became interested in fungi only recently. Since being made redundant I have, of course, had time on my hands, leisure to notice things. I try not to brood. That this year was exceptional for an abundance of fungi first struck me while taking a train to see my wife. I can no longer afford to run a car. From the economy-class window I observed meadows covered with whitish protrusions among the grass. It took me only a little while to realise that these were mushrooms, though I had never seen such a sight before.

Back at my home after my day out, I explored my garden. Largely untended (I sometimes mow the lawn) since my wife was stolen from me ten years ago, it has gone back to nature in rather a pleasing

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way. For instance, shrubs which she planted have transformed themselves into trees. Under them and in mossy corners against the walls, I came upon a variety of fungi: agarics, lepiotas, horns-of-plenty, and, of course, the puffball. These names were unfamiliar to me then. Two books and a video started me on what might become a lifelong obsession.

I am not a mushroom-eater myself. My wife was particularly fond of them. But in those days—I won't say when I last saw her, for I make a point of seeing her, but when I last spoke to her—the only mushrooms obtainable in the shops were the common kind, and the only differentiation that between "large" and "button." Things have changed. To the uninitiated these supermarket cartons, wrapped in clingfilm, may appear to contain only "mixed mushrooms"; I, however, can name them as shitaki, canterelles, boletus, and morels, pale slivers resembling slices of blood-drained flesh, lemony fibrous strips, plump glutinous gobbets, chocolate-brown elastic lumps. Well, there is no accounting for tastes.

The day I came upon amanita phalloides in my garden, under the sessile oak, was the day I saw my wife for the first time for some weeks. You understand that though I think about her every day, go to the town where she lives, keep an eye on her house, and spend some time in her local shopping centre, I do not always see her. Needless to say, she never sees me. But on this occasion, invisible among the racks of shellsuits, I spotted her in the distance approaching the vegetable counters. I am not exaggerating when I say my heart quaked. It is always a shock, even after so long.

I watched from my sartorial hideaway. Too far away to see what she bought, I followed her with my eyes from vegetables to pizzas, from pasta to mineral waters, and thence to the checkout. That night I ran the video through once again. Yellow and white, with pallid gills and raggedy hat, phalloides blossomed on the screen in all its deadly glory. The Death Cap, as the voice-over called it, adding cheerfully that very small quantities cause intense suffering, then death.

If I were to grow cannabis sativa I would be breaking the law. The police would come, root up and destroy the plants. But it is no offence to grow phalloides, most deadly of all indigenous fungi. With impunity, I might if I wished turn my shady half-acre into a Death Cap plantation. If only I could! But fungi are capricious, inconstant, fungi are fitful and vicissitudinous. Who has not heard of those

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would-be mushroom farmers who have the kit and precisely obey the instructions only to find their growing barns empty and psalliota flourishing in the fields outside their property?

I have had to be content with what nature has supplied, and for my part can provide only encouragement in the form of shade, moisture, and protection. It was in October that the young fruit first broke through and the stipe pushed above the ground, its snowy veil bursting to reveal the olive-yellow cap. The flesh, my book says, is white and smells of raw potatoes. How gratifying to discover that this was indeed so and I had not confused phalloides with, for instance, xerula. (I love my love with an x because she is xanthic, I hate her with an x because she is xylophagous.)

Careful not to touch the fruit bodies, using a knife and fork, I sliced into thin strips the cap and stipe of three specimens. They filled a large yogurt pot. With closed eyes, I stood there remembering my wife's ways, her fashion of cooking, her pleasure in eating, her smile. I remembered her slicing raw potatoes and I could smell the smell in my mind.

I took the yogurt pot with me next day and went straight from the station to the supermarket. There was no question of my wife's arriving for at least two hours; I have my memories, all too many of them, and I know her timetable, the order and regularity of her life. But for a while I waited, pacing, deep in thought, between bed-linen reductions and kitchenware. You must appreciate that until then, apart from the audiotapes and the carefully chosen articles sent her, and the enlightening letters posted to her relatives, I had taken no positive steps against my wife. The time had come for action. I hesitated no longer.

With a little practice, it takes only seconds to detach the clingfilm from the base of a mixed mushroom carton, slip in a slice or two of phalloides, and re-adhere the film. Among the fronds and filaments, the shreds and slivers, my delicate cilia passed unnoticed or passed for wisps of shitaki. I operated on some ten cartons, about half the stock, in this way. The place was not frequented at lunchtime. No one saw me, or if they did, approved the prudence of what they took for close examination prior to purchase. I have noticed how, for example, in these hard times, it is not uncommon for shoppers to taste the grapes before they buy.

I waited long enough to see my wife come in. My heart began to jog. One day, if this does not stop, it will kill itself and me with it.

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Of course I realised that there was only a fifty percent chance of my wife consuming one of the fatal batch. But in this game of culinary Russian Roulette, these are very favourable odds. Still, on my next visit with fresh supplies I operated on fifteen cartons. After all, she is not the only one to consider but also her live-in paramour and her extended family, who all live nearby and whose sheepish faces and obese forms I often see in the aisles between the sauces and the frozen desserts.

At last, having heard and seen nothing of the consequence of my actions, I was obliged to sacrifice the last of phalloides, stripping the leaf mould under the sessile oak bare of its potato-scented crop. This time—I was a little late—only fourteen cartons of mixed mushrooms remained and in less than two minutes the contents of the yogurt pot were nestling among the sinuate gills and elliptoid membranes. In fact, I had barely finished when I spotted her entering by way of exotic fruits and, my heart on its treadmill, I slipped away.

Three days later a small paragraph in the newspaper told me that the supermarket had withdrawn all "mixed mushrooms" due to two unexplained deaths and several cases of severe illness. But the deaths, alas, were not hers nor his nor theirs. When it has blown over and "mixed mushrooms" are back on the counter, I shall have to begin all over again next year.

At present, the ground under the sessile oak is covered with snow. All fungi have succumbed to frost. I shall mark the spot where the spores of phalloides lie deep in the earth, for there must be no trampling or digging. And some mnemonic must be contrived to help me remember the precise location. Oh, I love my love with a mn because she is mnemic, I hate her with a mn because she is mnemonical, her name is Mnemosyne and she is the goddess of remembrance.

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a *NEW* short story by

CLAYTON EMERY

The Robin Hood of fiction, the most romanticized of all outlaws, is less often an ally of the authorities than a thorn in their side. Maine author Clayton Emery turns the formula on its head in this new story when he places the hero of Sherwood Forest at the center of a grisly murder investigation in the company of the local sheriff. Mr. Emery has made use of the Robin Hood legend in other fiction, including his novel Tales of Robin Hood *(Baen, 1988), and the anthologized story "Robin Hood's Treausre". . . .*

DOWSING THE DEMON

by CLAYTON EMERY

"Murder! Help, for God's mercy! It's murder and witchcraft! Help!"

Hammering on a door rang on and on. Robin scrambled off his pallet, fumbled for his bow and sword, found neither, settled for his hat. Marian scuffed on her shoes and combed fingers through her dark hair. The outlaw wrenched the bar from the inn door and they dashed outside.

The morning sun slanted long shadows down the sleepy streets of Lincoln. The faces and shuttered windows of one- and two-story houses were etched in darkness. April was already warm. Dew spiraled from the trashy street. Four doors down from the inn, a young man pounded on the door of a small house.

His cries of murder and witchcraft had people congregating from all sides. His wails were infectious. One man shouted, "Open the door then, by the rood!" Another yelled, "It's barred tight!"

Robin shoved through the crowd and jiggled the wooden latch, thumped the door with his shoulder. It bent at top and bottom but

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not the middle. Barred. As he smacked the door, smells spurted around the edges. Brimstone. And blood.

He whirled on the shrieking lad. "Hush! All of you! Whose house is this?"

The youth plucked his thin beard with both hands. He wore a smock of rich blue with an embroidered collar, a belt with a silver-hilted dagger, yellow hose, good shoes of ox hide, a brimmed black hat. "It's the house of Jabin, my father, but something's plaguey wrong! The house stinks of blasphemy!"

Robin had to agree. The smell that wafted from inside was enough to knock a man flat. "Is there a back door?"

"No, only the window, and it's shuttered! And the chimney!"

Though still befuddled by sleep, Robin felt hairs prickle along his neck. What devil's work had the occupants gotten up to?

"The door it is, then. You and you and you, come with me!" From the crowd of workmen, wives, and idle children, Robin picked out a porter with a tumpline and a pair of masons in stone-dusty aprons. While Marian minded the door, the four men hopped down the street to a house under construction, hoisted a square beam, and trotted back. Three lusty blows to the middle cracked the door and bashed loose the inside bar.

The reek of brimstone made their eyes water, the smell of blood gagged them. Holding his breath, Robin slipped inside and fumbled open the shutters to the one window on the street.

Dawn's light filtered through a yellow haze. Revealed was a scene from some pardoner's chapbook of Hell.

The house was only one room. Four whitewashed walls, a worn wooden floor, smoke-stained rafters, a stone chimney, a saggy rope bed, a red chest against the wall, a table and two stools, a cabinet for a larder, pegs on the walls where hung clothing. Spare, dingy, but tidy. A short broom of rushes stood propped against the fireplace.

On the floor lay an old man stringy and naked as a plucked chicken, and white as one. His throat had been hacked away, his belly from ribs to crotch torn open, as if he'd been rooted to death by boars. His eyes were wide open, filmy and white as boiled eggs. By the bed, tangled in blankets, lay a goodwife in a pool of blood, stabbed so many times her skin and organs hung in shreds. The gore looked all the more offensive for having violated the woman's clean floorboards.

Marian bit a knuckle. Robin blocked the door with one brawny arm as the crowd pushed for a look. Yet the young merchant, the

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son who'd raised the alarm, squeezed between him and Marian with the strength of the hysterical.

He flopped to his knees alongside the dead man. "Oh, Father, Father! Who's done this? Who?" Old Jabin didn't answer, only stared wide-eyed at his son as if in accusation. Unmindful of blood, the lad touched his father's face.

"Sir, wait!" piped Marian. "We needs look in his eyes!"

But the son clawed closed the thin eyelids. "I can't stand his gaze. As if it were my fault. Had I gotten here only an hour earlier—" He broke into tears, sobbing.

Robin rubbed his beard as he surveyed the room. Shocking though this macabre spectacle was, he'd seen worse, though not usually this early in the morning. And his famous curiosity, an itch he could never scratch, prodded him like an ox goad.

Marian lit a stick of candlewood at the smoldering hearth. Gingerly, she picked across the room and leaned over the dead mother. She peered deep into the woman's eyes.

"Anything?" Robin asked.

"No," Marian sighed. "Nothing. She must have closed her eyes when the knife struck."

Robin grunted. Something by the fireplace had caught his eye. He stooped and swirled his fingers through white grit, the only dirt in the room. Streaks of it pointed to the chimney. Feeling around, Robin tugged loose a stone big as a loaf. Behind it was a cool darkness. Squatting, he mumbled to Marian, "There's a hole here big enough for my head. Nothing in it, though."

"The hole or the head?" Her lame jest was just something to break the silence. Marian left the dead mother, put her hand on the red chest against the wall, tried to lift the lid. It clinked and stayed put. "This chest is locked. My thumbs are pricking, Rob . . . And look here."

Robin's wife knelt at the fireplace, leaned low and sniffed, and then picked out some charred scraps of leather that stained her fingers yellow-brown. "What think you of that?"

"It's not something they had for supper. Let me see this door. . . ."

Waving the crowd back, Robin shoved the battered door shut. It groaned in protest. Twin iron brackets had held the bar solidly across the posts. One bracket was broken, the fracture gray against blackened iron. Behind the door, the other bracket was twisted out of shape. The stout bar trailed from it to the floor. The door itself was oak, thick, and battened so neither wind nor knife blade could

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infiltrate. It was dark behind the door but, bending, Robin found jots of yellow gunk smeared on the battens. He scraped them like old cheese with his fingernails. He sniffed, held his fingers to Marian.

"Why, it's sweet! It's—"

The door slammed Robin in the face as it was kicked open. The outlaw hit the wall. A splinter nicked his nose and it bled.

"Stand fast, you thieving blackguard! Don't you move!"

Filling the splintered doorway was a sheriff of Lincoln in a red smock and gray hose, with a sword at his belt as badge of office. He carried a long club with the head drilled and filled with lead and hoisted it to keep Robin on the defensive.

At his other hand, Marian shifted. The sheriff whirled on her, then froze when he spotted the bodies on the floor. "God's teeth and fish!"

Behind the sheriff came a younger version of himself, a deputy, obviously his son. But the lad whirled and dashed into the street to vomit. The crowd parted for him.

Still on bloody knees, the young merchant keened. "Witches and demons have descended, murdered my parents!" He waved his hands around the room. "Smell the brimstone from their passing. Satan's minions have savaged them and drunk their blood!"

The sheriff commanded the room with his presence, his club, and his broad belly, though his son's retching spoiled the effect somewhat. He studied the bodies calmly. "If that's so, they didn't drink much. You're Peter, ain't you, the wool merchant? This couple's son? Well, I'm sorry, lad."

He stretched his club and thumped Robin's breastbone. "And who are you, standing knee-deep in crime and picking lice out of your beard? I never saw you before. Think you to rob the dead?"

Robin's temper sparked. His hands clutched for the sword he didn't have. He squelched his ire. He and Marian were in town to buy cloth, both Lincoln green and red, for spring clothes for the Sherwood band. Too, it was a holiday after a winter cooped up in the Greenwood. They wore disguises plucked from the common chests in their cave, red woolen smocks and hose and soft round hats, the garb of minor merchants. Robin felt naked without his sword and longbow; he carried only a long Irish knife.

Robin showed the sheriff the top of his head, hang-dog and humble. "I'm Robert of Farnesfield, Sir Sheriff, near Ealden Byrgen. This is my wife, Matilda. She knows some herbalism. We thought we might help if someone was hurt."

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The sheriff glared, still suspicious. Behind him, in the doorway, the porter raised his voice. "He speaks true, Martin. He came out of the inn and we all broke down the door. He couldn't have murdered no one, and he was just looking around while she there checked them dead folk."

Watching Robin with one eye, Martin the Sheriff asked the porter, "What mean you, broke down the door? How could the door be barred if all within were murdered?"

"That's what I was wondering," Robin supplied. He wiped blood from the cut on his nose. The outlaw usually took every man as he met him, without prejudging, but this sheriff had two counts against him already. "On the backside of this door—"

"You belt up," the sheriff told him. "Keep out of the way and keep still."

Robin leaned back against the wall. Marian, calm as a cloud, seated herself on the red chest.

The sheriff squatted over the dead man, prodded the wounds with his club. The young merchant, face stained with tears, raised bloody hands. "Sheriff, who could have done this? My father was a good, honest man! He had no truck with necromancers! Yet he's been struck down by sorcery! It was no man born of woman could have done this!"

The sheriff expelled a gust flavored with rye bread and beer. "I don't know, Peter. Wights and phantasms can't touch iron, but I'd say this ungodly mess was from a steel knife. Still . . ." He pointed his beard at the shattered door.

"Hoy!" called a voice from down the street. "Hoy! Come to save the day, I have!"

The crowd perked up. By now a hundred or more people crowded the street, all gawking at the sensation through the doorway and one window. Most had been quiet, as if at a funeral, but now giggles and whispers broke out. Robin peeked out the door over heads. Jogging and puffing their way was something the outlaw had seen only at fairs.

Skipping like a milk-fat puppy, there bounded a man burly and jowly as Friar Tuck. Wild red hair fluttered. A parti-colored smock, red on one side, blue on the other, circled the man with a broad yellow girdle, and one hose was green and one black. Behind him scampered a dog brindled and golden as a butterfly, but incomplete, being three-legged and one-eyed. This fat man—or tournament marshal or mummer—waved a dowsing stick like a giant wishbone.

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Robin caught comments from the crowd. "Oh, Lord, look who's coming." "He'll know what to do." "Aye, collect his fee and run." "He cured my mother of the boils." "Boils go away on their own, fool." "He'll make us laugh, if nothing else."

"Make way, make way!" The fat man puffed amidst them. "Denis the Dowser's on the job! Let me through! I needs see—Saint Benno's keys and fishes!"

His pop-eyes bugged even farther at the sight of the ravaged bodies. Robin noted the man had soft skin, a weak chin, and little beard. He wondered if the dowser were a eunuch, and if that contributed to his power—if any. The crippled dog stuck his head between the dowser's knees and drooled.

"Denis, you big bag of wind." The sheriff stood over the body, club hanging. His sheepish son had crept in behind him. "What are you doing here with your infernal stick? I know you can find water with that thing, but there's no way you can track—"

"Ah, but I can, Martin! I can! By the tongue of Saint Genevieve I can! I needs only wave my stick around the room and I'll track your murderers—demonic or no—to the ends of the earth! Shall I try? Dare you I try?"

The sheriff slapped his heavy stick against his thigh. "And you'll collect a fee from the city if you're successful, I suppose."

The fat man smirked and spread his hands. "If you catch your murderer, what care you? Have you any clues to proceed from now?"

The sheriff blew through his moustache, surveyed the hearth, the window, the door. Then he swept his club towards the corpses. The crowd buzzed.

Gimpy dog at his heels, Denis the Dowser minced inside, skirted pools of blood, and positioned himself between the dead husband and wife. Striking a pose, the dowser dropped his head as if in prayer. He grasped the dowsing stick tight, thumbs pointed towards his chest. Robin noticed a red thread tied around the fork as a charm against witches. He imagined that the stick was rowan wood, mountain ash, probably cut under a full moon with a blade of copper or brass. Robin wasn't certain whether he believed in dowsing or not. Certainly this clown—

Denis moaned. The rod's tip began to vibrate. People at door and window gasped. The dowser's body vibrated along with the stick. He crowed, "By the stones of Saint Stephen, by the arrows of Saint Sebastian, by the flames of Saint Lawrence, show me the way, oh

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Lord, lead me to the traitors who've committed this dastardly act and spilled these innocents' blood!"

Robin stared as the dowser howled, jerking his head back and forth as if struck by invisible blows, writhing as if trying to free his feet of mud. Meanwhile, the mangy dog limped around the room, sniffed at the bodies, lapped at blood, lifted his leg against the bedpost. Evidently the mutt had seen it before.

Denis shivered, calling on every saint Robin knew and many he didn't. "By the cross of Saint Helen! By the visions of Saint Hildegard! By the monster of Saint Cuthbert!—" Louder he yelled, until people outside moaned in ecstasy with him. Even the dog barked sharply twice.

Denis snapped open his pop-eyes, grimaced with horror and haunting. Then the dowsing stick lunged for the doorway like a spear and Denis was towed behind it. People squealed and shrilled and dodged. Denis, his dog hot behind him, cantered off down the street, barely able to keep up with his own dowsing rod. "Saint Thomas à Canterbury, send me grace! Saint Gregory, send me wisdom! Saint Ambrose,—"

Sheriff Martin hollered to his son to guard the house, and took off after Denis. Marian hiked her skirts and followed. Robin grabbed his knife hilt and ran along, with the young merchant right behind.

People stared as the dowser plunged by, head down and stumbling, stick outright as if it were an arrow. The crazy dog skipped along in its queer gait, first at one heel, then the other, until Robin wondered how the man didn't step on the poor creature. The crowd would have followed, but the sheriff waved them back with his club. When Marian drew alongside, skirts dancing and cheeks flushed, Sheriff Martin waved his club at her. But she flashed him a winning smile, lighting up the street, and he let her be. Robin trotted behind the sheriff, out of sight.

Magician he might be, but fat Denis was no marathon runner, and he spent what breath he had calling on saints, so it wasn't long before he fell to a trot, then a brisk walk. They neared the end of the street where the houses were all two stories, the homes of more prosperous merchants, then struck the marketplace. Dotted around the big square were stalls of winter vegetables, sheaves of salt hay, paddocks with skinny horses and oxen, blacksmiths whanging on anvils, and tables and tables of bolts of cloth, including the fabled Lincoln green and red. Everyone interrupted business as the dowser entered the square.

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Denis waggled the stick in a half-circle before him. He gabbled, "Saint Hugh, protect your people! Saint Wolfgang, heal our sorrow!" Between his heels, the dog sniffed the ground and drooled, began to cock his missing leg against his master's ankle and then recanted, jigged sideways, sat down.

"They make a good pair," Robin hissed to Marian, "both being afflicted with Saint Vitus's Dance."

His wife puffed her red cheeks. "Hush!"

Slowly, eerily, Denis waved the stick around. The rod stopped as if arrested by an invisible hand. "Thanks be to Saint Norbert, and Gregory the Seventh! Thy wills be done!"

They were off. On the far side of the marketplace were the mills, all kinds, grinding, sawing, and many fulling mills, for here the River Witham took a right angle in the middle of town. Across a stone bridge they clattered, four people watching the dowser and the dowser watching the stick before him. With the dog skipping under his feet, Denis stumbled off the bridge and down the embankment, to stop where the mucky bank dropped into the brown river. Rotten hulls and scraps of rope and trash dotted the mud.

"By Jonah!" he cried. "The dastards entered a boat!"

"Boat?" echoed the sheriff. He banged his club on an overturned hull in frustration. "Then we've lost them!"

"Not if," Denis panted, "we can get a boat too!"

"You can't follow them across the water, can you?" asked Robin. He still wasn't sure whether he believed in Denis's dowsing ability or not. Things were happening too fast.

"By the eyes of Samson, I can follow anywhere if we get a boat!"

The five of them looked down the river. Two men in a low skiff heaped with saplings were building a fish weir. Robin cupped his hands and hollered, "Fishermen! A crown for your trouble!" Digging in his purse inside his shirt, he held aloft a coin.

"What's a beggar like you," puffed the sheriff, "doing handing out crowns like they was groats? What'd you say your name was?"

"Robert." The outlaw looked him in the eye. "Of Barnesdale."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "You said Farnesfield before."

Robin blinked.

Marian put in, "I hail from Farnesfield, good sheriff. My family lives there. We're occupying their loft until we can buy a house. But I fear my scalawag husband is too free with our coins. Would he were a sensible man like yourself, wise in the ways of the world

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and blessed with an exceptional memory." Her smile warmed the space under the bridge.

The sheriff shook his head in exasperation.

The boatmen had drawn close enough to catch the coin. Five passengers and one dog clambered aboard and perched on the sweet-cut saplings. The boatmen pushed back their hoods and poled into midstream.

Denis aimed his stick along the west bank, for the east was too steep to land a boat. Beside him, the dog teetered on his one back leg and drooled overboard. The animal sniffed at the wind, bubbles in the water, glooping fish, flecks of drifting grass. As the trail grew colder, Denis hollered so his saints might better hear. "Saint Giles, be our friend! Saint Wenceslaus, the betrayed, guide us to the perpetrators of—"

Denis prattled on as the bank slid by. Robin realized he was hungry. He'd missed his porridge and beer. He heard Marian's stomach rumble and smiled at her. "Once this foolishness has run its course, we can—"

The dog barked twice, interrupting his master's reverie. Denis shook his head and stood upright in the boat, almost tipping them all into the Witham. The stick quivered like a hunting dog's nose. "That way, by Saint Paul! The heathens await!"

The boatmen stroked until they bumped the muddy shore. Denis leapt out and splashed them all. His dog dove like a seal, shed water from matted fur, and scampered up the bank leaving three muddy footprints. Robin hopped out, wetting his boots, caught a giggling Marian by her waist, and landed her dryshod. Peter and Sheriff Martin slopped along behind.

Here the streets were narrower, the houses more tumbledown. Denis dilly-dallied like a drunkard, his muddy dog at his heels. Priests and fishwives and masons, shabby and ragged, turned to watch the parade. Around corners and down alleys they went, till they threaded a twisted shambles. The entourage had to weave around garbage, ash heaps, bones, and the emptying of chamberpots. Robin noted that people here lurked in doorways and peeked from windows to satisfy their curiosity.

All along the way the dowser wailed his litany of saints until he was hoarse. Robin figured he'd run out of breath soon, and they could drop this nonsense. It was obvious the sheriff's temper was fraying. He'd raised his club for a halt when Denis stopped.

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The house had once been large, with a solid stone lower floor, but a fire had gutted it and collapsed the roof. A rotten door leaned in a warped frame.

Denis puffed, rested a hand on his dog's wet head, waved to indicate they'd arrived. The sheriff hoisted his heavy club and rapped on the crooked door. Nothing happened, though Robin thought he heard a rustle inside. He realized they might suddenly come face-to-face with vicious murderers, and loosened his staghorn knife in its sheath.

The sheriff raised a big shoe and kicked the door flat.

The interior stayed dark. The fallen door raised dust at the foot of—a pale maiden in a ragged gown. Barefoot, she crept closer to the light as if it pained her. Under her stringy hair, her face was lined and strained.

The sheriff barked, "Mary? Ach! Where's your good-for-nothing brother—"

A roar like a lion's drowned him out. A huge form shaggy as a werewolf bowled the pale girl aside and leaped full in the sheriff's face. The official's club was slapped aside. Steel flashed and the sheriff dropped with a howl, stabbed and spraying blood. The monster raised his bloodied knife to stab overhand.

Robin stiff-armed Marian so hard she bounced in the road a dozen feet away. Lacking time to draw his own knife, Robin simply jumped at the attacker. The bloodied steel scythed down at him, but he ducked under the blow. The monster's arm slammed onto Robin's shoulder and the knife clattered into the street.

Half-tripping over the prostrate sheriff, Robin could only ram a fist into the monster's belly. The mighty frame shook, but then Robin was being pushed on his back, the monster atop him. Two mighty hands found his windpipe.

With a shock the outlaw realized this wasn't a monster. It was a man—dirty, hairy, with a wild beard and tangled dark hair, in clothes so filthy they looked black. But the biggest shock came when, staring down the man's throat, Robin saw that his tongue was gone, cut out, leaving a waggling stump. He kicked to get free and swung at the man's ears, in vain. His vision tinged with blackness . . .

A shadow above blacked out more light. The monster gasped gargled blood that splashed on Robin's face. The outlaw pushed free of the collapsing form and struggled up, rubbing his throat.

The monster was dead, pierced through the heart by a silver-hilted dagger. Peter stood above him, pale as if he'd been strangled himself. His sheath was empty, his hands slack.

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Marian bent over the dark man and looked to her husband, then tended the sheriff. His forearm had been skinned to the bone.

"I should have known it'd be Nicholas, our town wastrel," the official growled. Marian cut strips off his smock for bandages. "He's served enough time in the stocks and at the wheel for robbing and beating folks. It was a circuit judge ordered his tongue cut out when the swine cursed him to his face. I'll probably get blood poisoning! Christ!"

He barked at the slim girl cowering in the doorway. "Mary, you damned slut! You're as guilty as him! You'll pay for this!"

"Hush." Marian tied off a rude bandage and made the man wince. "The poor thing's scared witless. A beast like that would terrify Saint Columba. You know this girl and her travails, you're wise enough to see her sorrows, aren't you?"

She addressed the trembling girl. "Pray, fetch what your brother brought home and we'll depart. We shan't harm you. I give my word."

The girl disappeared, like a ghost in the sunlight, and reappeared lugging an iron strongbox. She set it on the threshold and prised open the lid. Inside was a handful of silver coins and several dozen copper. "I didn't know," the girl squeaked. "I didn't know what he'd done. I—I didn't—know." Marian laid a hand on her arm to shush her.

Leaning against the door frame, the sheriff groused, "That stinking changeling bastard butchered those old folks for this paltry sum? Damned little for two lives."

"Three," said Marian. "How's your throat, Rob?"

Robin massaged his Adam's apple and waved. Every swallow burned, but he could breathe better than the monster Nicholas. He moved to pick up the strongbox.

"I thought your name was Robert," the sheriff grunted.

The outlaw rasped. "I go by many names. Sometimes I get confused myself."

The sheriff sniffed. "You saved my life, too. I won't forget that."

Robin nodded. "And Peter saved mine." The boy didn't look up. He stood facing up the alleyway, eager to be off.

Through all this, Denis the Dowser had stood to one side, his fat frame like a haystack, his lopsided dog panting between his feet. To him, Robin said, "You've shown your skill, dowser. Your stick led us true. No doubt you'll fetch a reward from the town elders."

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Somber for the first time, the magician mumbled, "Would the saints could raise up the dead and erase this day. Then would we all be paid."

Marian caught Robin's eye and nodded towards his middle. Without letting the sheriff see, the outlaw tossed some silver pennies into the depths of the ruined house.

Limping, grumbling, cradling their wounds, the party and the dog tottered towards the river. They left the dead murderer where he lay with his sister weeping over him.

Rather than hunt up a boat, they threaded the murky streets and crossed the bridge and filtered through the marketplace. Robin caught his wife's elbow and spoke low. "There's much left unexplained. I can guess how he closed the door and barred it, but how did he open it?"

"He didn't, but it opened," Marian whispered. "I've figured that out. But how he closed it—"

"Well, I can—he didn't open it but it opened?"

"Hush. You'll see."

The house came into view, with the sheriff's son/deputy and the curious crowd before it. With them was an exasperated priest eager to deliver a prayer for the dead, but the boy obviously feared the wrath of his father more than the wrath of God. He looked relieved to see his father, then dismayed at his bandaged arm and cross expression.

As they stopped before the house, Robin said. "My curiosity may kill me yet, but I can vouchsafe some answers. I know how the door was barred."

The sheriff raised his hand to rub his chin and winced. "Get on with it, then. I needs get drunk soon. This wound burns like the pit."

Robin shoved the door open. The bodies remained undisturbed. Flies buzzed around their dead faces. The outlaw plucked the bar from behind the door and brought it out into the sunlight. He pointed to yellowish smears dotted down one side. "Beeswax. Someone kneaded lumps of it, pressed them against the battens, stuck the bar to them. When the door was banged shut, the shock dropped the bar into the iron brackets. So the murderer left the house locked behind him."

The sheriff frowned and thumped his club on the ground. "P'raps. Maybe. I don't think Nicholas was clever enough to think on it, and

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I can't see why he'd bother. And how'd he open the door in the first place?"

"He didn't," Marian said. "I can explain that. Rob, step inside and bar the door, please."

"The brackets are broken."

Marian smiled sweetly at her husband. "Pretend to bar it, then. Dear."

Shrugging, Robin stepped into the charnel house and closed the door. He was alone with the corpses and flies. Shuddering, he propped the bar against the cracked door and called, "Right! It's barred! Now what?"

Marian's voice came through the window. "Oh, Rob. I forgot something. Come out again, please."

Robin took down the bar and opened the door. "What is it now, Marian?"

The sheriff scowled. "Not Matilda?"

The wife only smiled. "Notice I got the door open. All I did was ask."

"But . . ." said most of the men. The sheriff grumbled, "Jabin wouldn't open the door for a stranger. And Nicholas couldn't talk anyway. He had no tongue."

"Exactly," said Marian. "Somebody else—"

"Catch him!" shouted Robin. He jumped but was too late.

Peter pelted down the street and careened around a corner.

"Them alleys are all twisty!" shouted the sheriff. "He can go a hundred different ways! Get after him, Berthold! Use your legs!"

Robin snagged the piebald sleeve of Denis the Dowser. "Come on, man! You needs track like you never tracked before!" Surprised by the sudden turn of events, gulping for air, Denis was tugged along, his dog treading under his feet. The sheriff's son tromped ahead of them.

Robin took the corner Peter had passed, stumbled up a short alley towing Denis like a barge, and came to a crossing. Peter would know these alleys, he realized, but he didn't have a clue. The trash-strewn ground was impossible to read. The deputy Berthold took off down one alley, but Robin wouldn't risk running blind. "Denis! Find his trail!"

Manfully, Denis hoisted his dowsing stick before him. "By Saint Germain, the hunter, find this felon—"

Robin slapped the dowsing stick out of his hands. "Balls to that, you fat fraud! Get moving!" And he half-flung Denis before him.

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Denis sighed and then whistled. "Come Turk, track him, boy!"

The dog barked twice and took off skittering down an alley as if shot from a catapult. Robin was hard put to keep up with him, crippled or not. They tore down a short alley and then around a corner, down another straightaway where the houses almost touched, and on. Robin let his legs stretch and ran full out. He splashed in puddles, slipped in garbage and manure, ducked jutting beams and drying laundry.

They rounded a corner. Ahead he glimpsed the fleeing Peter.

"Halloo, the fox!" The outlaw put on a burst of speed. Within five heartbeats he caught up to the winded boy, and five paces beyond that, crashed full into him. The two tumbled headlong down the filthy alley. Robin scrambled up first, shedding dirt and debris, and smashed both knees onto the lad's back. With a sob, Peter crumbled. The dog cocked his head, happy and confused.

As Robin jerked him upright, the boy began to cry. Robin only shoved him down the alley. He panted, "It's about time—you cried. I've no doubt—your parents—cried over you—many a time."

Back in the main street, the first thing he saw was Marian, her eyes shining.

It wasn't long before the sobbing boy was trussed and guarded. The deputy strapped the door bar across his shoulders and tied his hands to it—an appropriate punishment, Robin thought. He asked, "What will happen to him?"

The sheriff hiccuped. He'd been plying himself with brandy from the inn for his wound. "He'll needs tell us where he's hid the rest of Jabin's money, for one. What Nicholas had in the strongbox probably wasn't a tenth of the old man's wealth. Then . . . usually we hang murderers. But this one's killed his own parents like some cold-blooded viper. Probably he'll burn." The boy, pale and pained, gave a moan and fainted.

"But there are still some things I don't understand," the sheriff added. The others agreed, but together they figured it out.

The sheriff offered, "Peter must'a gotten tired of working for his skiving father, who wouldn't give a groat to the Pope. He lived in this hovel next to a strongbox bursting with silver. He must'a decided to collect his inheritance early and hired Nicholas to do the killing. In the dead of night, he called his father to unbar the door. Nicholas hacked the parents to pieces."

Marian took over. "Peter went straight to the chimney and extracted the strongbox. Robin found grit on the floor. The thief had

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to know its hiding place, for the red chest was locked. A stranger would have breached it first. And I suspicioned Peter when he rushed into the room and closed his dead father's eyes. Everyone knows the image of the murderer lingers in the victim's eyes. Peter feared his own image would be etched there, rather than Nicholas's."

Robin added, "He set a leather bag full of brimstone on the fire to release the stench of witchcraft. Then he affixed the beeswax so the bar would fall when he closed the door. Thus only a supernal being could have exited. But the wax was stickier than he thought. When Peter returned in the morning, he found the door open—the wax still held the bar. So he banged the door to crack the wax and drop the bar. He woke the street with his pounding and shouting."

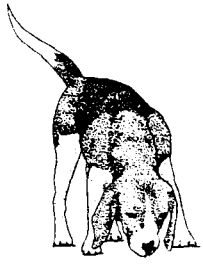
The sheriff commented, "He was quick to backstab Nicholas too, once he was cornered."

"But," Robin finished, "we never would have found him without the aid of Denis the Dowser. Sir Fraud of Lincoln."

The fat magician aped a pained expression. Without his dowsing stick to play with, he fiddled with his fingers. "Not so much a fraud. Half a fraud, perhaps. I did take you straight to Nicholas's door."

"You did no such thing!" Robin retorted, but he smiled to draw the sting. He patted the dog on his scruffy head. " 'Twas your hound did all the work! Your foolish howling to the saints and dancing like a March hare was nothing but a blind to keep people watching you and not that animal! It's true, you've trained your dog to track a scent from behind you rather than in front, and you watch him between your feet, but still—what's the point of all that foolishness?"

Denis gave him a pitying look, then shook his head of wild hair. "I see you know nothing of magic, Sir Robin of Wherever You Hie From. A man with a trained dog is just a clever man. Or a clever dog. But a dowser—ah!"



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

In crime and mystery fiction as in other areas of human endeavor, life doesn't always play fair. Some pretty good writers get the kind of promotional backing that turns them into immediate bestsellers, while others of greater talent struggle along for years in that authorial purgatory the publishing trade calls the mid-list. Some writers finally achieve their due recognition (and, one assumes, monetary reward) after years of toil, while others just as capable never do. Most writers have to make it on their own ability and luck, while a few garner big contracts on the basis of celebrity earned in another field—and usually (I would never say always) turn to ghosts to do the actual writing.

Fortunately, this column deals with recommended reading rather than the politics of publishing, but among the books considered below are examples of several of these phenomena, beginning with the latest (and possibly breakthrough) novel of one of popular fiction's most talented and individual authors, one who until now has been published mostly in paperback or by small specialist publishers and has acquired a formidable cult reputation.

**** Joe R. Lansdale: *Mucho Mojo,* Mysterious, $19.95. The two main characters from the author's 1990 novel *Savage Season,* Texas field workers Hap Collins, white and straight, and Leonard Pine, black and gay, return in a beautifully written whodunit, in some ways closer to Agatha Christie (who is referred to several times) than to the fifties paperbacks evoked by their previous adventure. The pair find the skeleton of a small child wrapped in porno magazines under the floorboards of Leonard's late uncle's house and work to clear Uncle Chester of complicity in a series of child murders. Lansdale offers a fresh answer to the question that Ellery Queen and other spinners of elaborate puzzles always had to address: why did the deceased resort to tantalizing and esoteric clues instead of delivering his message straight out? If you've been put off by Lansdale's wildman reputation, this may be the book with which to discover his extraordinary gifts. Its gross-out factor is no greater than that of the average contemporary crime novel, and the humor and decency of Hap and Leonard may surprise you.

**** Ronald Levitsky: *The Innocence That Was,* Scribners, $20. The fourth novel in the series about civil liberties lawyer Nate Rosen begins by confronting one of the toughest problems of legal ethics: Rosen successfully gets a pair of scumbag killer-rapists off on a

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technicality—with his teenage daughter Sarah among the spectators. The main plot concerns the murder of Sarah's best friend, whose diary had apparently accused one of their teachers of sexual molestation. Levitsky is a formidable stylist who handles family relationships and social/ethical issues with rare sensitivity. My only, mild, complaint: the mystery plot, though fully developed, is not quite as interesting as the other stuff.

*** Maan Meyers: *The High Constable,* Doubleday, $19.95. John Tonneman, who appeared as a young doctor new to the New-York (sic) of 1775 in the author's *The Kingsbridge Plot* (1993), returns as a middle-aged family man in this third novel in a formidable series. The year is 1808, the main news event President Thomas Jefferson's trade embargo (reversed in the then-faddish catch-phrase "O grab me"), which has crippled the shipping industry. The title character is a historical figure: Jacob Hays (1772-1850), the city's chief lawman and a precursor of modern police detectives. The Meyers team (Martin and Annette) are most notable for the wealth of period detail they manage to include without slowing down the story. Among the products of their meticulous research are the quotes from contemporary newspapers that head the fifty-two chapters and epilogue. They also include a five-page authors' note separating fact from fiction.

*** Martina Navratilova and Liz Nickles: *The Total Zone,* Villard, $21. The least we should be able to expect from a celebrity mystery novel is some inside detail on the author's field of expertise and the opportunity to guess what real people might have served as models for the fictional characters. Tennis champ Navratilova and her collaborator have certainly delivered these elements, providing a vivid depiction of the contrasting flavors of Wimbledon and Flushing Meadows and a cast with recognizable real-life equivalents. But they've done more than that in a novel that is both cleverly plotted and crisply written, with a heroine in Jordan Myles I look forward to meeting again. Like Bill Shoemaker's recent *Stalking Horse,* it ranks in the upper echelon of celebrity mysteries. Martina's heroine and Shoe's hero have some elements in common: both sports trainer Myles and ex-jockey Coley Killebrew had top flight careers freakishly cut short, giving them the convenient combination of relative youth, insider contacts, and freedom from the daily grind of competition that makes them ideal amateur sleuths.

** Nancy Taylor Rosenberg: *First Offense,* Dutton, $22.95. Though the writers who become bestsellers are not necessarily the best, you can usually find a reason for their success. In Rosenberg's case, it's an undeniable narrative gift that overcomes the basic unbelievability of her story and characters. This novel is better than its predecessor, *Interest of Justice* (1993), in a number of respects—there's an

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occasional glimmer of humor and the elaborate plot (including a vanished husband, a serial rapist, and an enigmatic probationer) is as intriguing as it is preposterous—but probation-officer heroine Ann Carlisle can be exasperating and the main villain shouldn't surprise many readers.

** Patricia O'Brien: *The Ladies' Lunch*, Simon and Schuster, $21. If this one doesn't get scooped up for a TV miniseries, somebody's asleep at the switch. It offers meaty roles for several middle-aged actresses; it's full of the kind of snappy visual images that herald commercial breaks; it tells an involving story that is neither too deep nor too original; and it has the kind of pat, all-loose-ends-accounted-for ending that seems at home on the small screen. The main characters are a quintet of mutually supportive and highly successful Washington D.C. professional women: a judge, a journalist, a congresswoman, a caterer married to a powerful government insider, and a President's press secretary. The latter, whose apparent suicide is the catalyst for much of the action, we get to know only in the reminiscences of the other characters. The mystery element fizzles, but there are worse-written books on the bestseller list.

In the past few years, the mystery fiction world has celebrated, with varying degrees of visibility, the centennials of some of the great names. Vintage Books, Random House's trade paperback line, commemorates the hundredth anniversary of Dashiell Hammett's birth with handsome editions of all his novels (year of original publication and price in parentheses): *Red Harvest* (1929; $9), *The Dain Curse* (1929; $8), *The Maltese Falcon* (1930; $9), *The Glass Key* (1931; $10), and *The Thin Man* (1933; $9). I must have seen John Huston's great (and remarkably faithful) 1941 film of *Falcon* a dozen times since I last cracked the novel, which evokes the characters as effectively as Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, and Sydney Greenstreet did and has the added benefit of Hammett's crisp, laconic prose. *The Thin Man*, on the other hand, is an inferior product that was actually improved by its 1934 transfer to the screen with William Powell and Myrna Loy—and I think its sequel, *After the Thin Man* (1936), from a Hammett screen treatment, was even better. Also available from Vintage are the short story regatherings *The Continental Op* (1974; $10), introduced by Steven Marcus, and *The Big Knockover* (1966; $12), introduced by Lillian Hellman, and the novella *Woman in the Dark* (first published separately in book form in 1988; $7).

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New Jersian Kate Gallison is a superb satirist who finds grist for her mill in even the darkest of subjects. She's in a slightly more serious mood than usual this time, but she's never without her characteristic punch . . .

PLASTIC

by KATE GALLISON

"Whenever we want to," the man was saying, "we can get to your family." His English was accented—Iranian? Libyan?—but his appearance was not exotic. Dark hair, olive skin, blue work clothes, he could have belonged to the crowd of anonymous New Yorkers that Dr. Alan Berger saw every day on the street. Except, of course, for the large gun resting across his knees. "At any time," the man continued. "We know where you live, where your children go to school." He produced a photograph of Dr. Berger's family coming out of their apartment building on Central Park West. "But why should it be necessary to speak of these things? You are a professional. I am requesting your professional services. I can pay whatever you ask."

Dr. Berger accepted the picture. It was not a good likeness of Joan: the wind had caught her hair and was blowing it the wrong way; she wouldn't have liked it. But the children were, as always, touchingly beautiful, with their little trusting hands in hers.

The man had dropped his gaze from Berger's face and was now examining his own fingernails, which had something sticky and gray embedded in them, something like modeling clay. As he waited for Berger's answer he dug under the nail of his left ring finger with his right thumbnail, dislodging a curl of the gray substance.

Plastic explosive, Berger thought with a start. Two or three little curls of the stuff were scattered across the polished surface of Berger's desk. Berger wondered what it would take to set it off. He wondered how this person, who smelled faintly of foreign food and cordite, had got into his office. Where was the Saturday watchman? "So what you want is for me to change your face, and if I don't you

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will harm my family," said Berger, stalling for time, trying to think.

The man smiled. Berger reflected that he might do better to seek the attentions of a dentist.

"You must understand that this is not something I do every day," Berger said. "My practice is ordinarily limited to repairing injuries and correcting congenital deformities."

"Shortening the noses of vain young girls," the man sneered, "whose parents have money."

Berger shrugged. There was some of that, certainly, but most of his patients were truly in need of facial reconstruction to avoid being stared at by strangers. Indeed, in twenty years of practice he had never to his knowledge been asked to alter anyone's features for the purpose of concealing the person's identity. Berger and his wife had discussed the subject only that morning over breakfast. She had seen a news story about Salman Rushdie, the writer who had offended Islam so deeply that the Iranian government had offered an enormous reward to anyone who murdered him—British Airways, the story said, refused to carry him, for fear of risk to the crew and the other passengers—and she remarked, "Poor man, I wonder why he doesn't get his face changed."

Berger had launched into a long discourse on the subject of personal identity. This was, after all, the modern age, when all were free to be themselves, even to the point of wearing unusual facial features. Most people were loath to part with their own faces even under the threat of death. Nobody these days had his face changed, not Salman Rushdie, not the unfortunate young women one heard of who were pursued from city to city by stalkers (always presuming that any of them could have afforded plastic surgery), not even mobsters seeking refuge in the federal witness protection program. He explained all this to his wife, and he could have gone on talking about it, but her flitting attention was caught by another story, something about a car bombing involving the death of a diplomat from the Egyptian legation. She began to chatter about what a wonderful thing it was that their children were safe from things like that. Little did she know.

Berger considered repeating his observations to the man with the gun. "People don't have their faces changed lightly," he said. "It causes all kinds of psychological trauma. I would urge you to reconsider."

"Trauma?" the man said. "Come to my country, or what is left of it, and I will show you trauma."

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Berger slid open his desk drawer, thinking to draw out a legal release form for the man to sign, but his action was misinterpreted. The gun came up from the man's lap. He barked an order in some foreign language and two flunkies burst in, tall and stupid-looking, brandishing long, glittering knives.

"Please excuse me," said Berger. "I didn't mean to cause a disturbance. There is a release form in this drawer that I need you to sign before I can agree to do the operation. I have to explain the risks to you, and you have to sign the form. That's how we do things here."

"I sign nothing," the man said. "My name is not for you to know."

"Very well," said Berger. "Have it your own way." The possibility of a malpractice suit seemed remote, anyway, under the circumstances. The law was not this man's weapon. Actually it was a good sign, his not wanting Berger to know his name. He might intend to leave him alive after the operation.

Berger began to view the project not as a capitulation to terrorism but as an aesthetic exercise. As a young man he had wanted to be a sculptor, and although he had given it up for the more lucrative field of plastic surgery, the creative impulse was still there. Yet never once had Berger indulged his artistic yearnings by sculpting a patient's face into his own idea of the beautiful. No, when he worked on a patient it was to make the patient more like the patient's real self, even if only the real self of the patient's secret heart. "What is it you want to look like?" he said to the man.

"Someone else."

"Someone in particular?" Perhaps there was someone the man wanted to impersonate. That would be very difficult. There were things to be considered, such as bone structure.

"No, no, certainly not. Make me different, do you understand? Make me different. Make me look other than the way I look now. Make me unrecognizable."

"Ah." That would be much easier. Berger got down to business and made a few sketches. Force of habit, he made the man's nose a bit shorter, his eyes somewhat less puffy, and held the sketch up for inspection. A handsome fellow.

"Not so much like a Hollywood movie star," said the man. "Just different from the way I look now."

"Good," said Berger. "We'll dispense with the sketches then." Clearly this was a rush job. He would work directly with the mate-

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rial. "If you'll come into my examining room, we can scrub up and I'll put you to sleep."

"Forget it," said the man.

"You won't wash?"

"I won't be put to sleep. You must think me a complete fool."

"Surely you don't expect me to work on your face without an anesthetic."

"Give me something local."

"Very well, then. But you must wash thoroughly and put on a gown." Berger sent the man into the shower with a bar of disinfectant soap. "Be sure to wash your hair while you're at it."

As he gowned and scrubbed himself under the baleful eyes of Ali and Rachman, Berger suddenly thought, *Why am I taking all this trouble?* He was about to have one of the worst criminals on Earth under his knife. It would be easy enough not to wash all that well, to give some pathogenic organism a chance at him. Anthrax. There was never any anthrax around when you needed it.

And yet. Even with the threats to his family, could Berger bring himself to knowingly harm a patient? He had never done so before, and some of the most reprehensible people in Manhattan had come under his care at one time or another. The year he volunteered at the prison, the time he treated the bond trader who stole all those millions and put so many people out of work. . . . No, it was impossible, no matter how many innocent people this person might maim or kill in his future career, not even considering that Berger's wife and children might be among them.

Berger could do only what he was sworn to do, and that was, first of all, do no harm. He prepared his instruments while the terrorist lay down on the table.

As he filled a syringe with his choice of local anesthetic, Berger suddenly thought to ask, "You aren't being treated for glaucoma, by any chance, are you?"

"What's it to you?"

"Glaucoma is sometimes treated with a drug that destroys your body's ability to produce acetylcholinesterase. If I were to inject you with this, and you had none of that particular enzyme in your body to metabolize it, the effect could be to render your smooth muscle function so relaxed as to inhibit respiratory function."

"What?"

"You would simply stop breathing," said Berger.

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"Right," said the terrorist, stretching his arms and appearing to make himself more comfortable on the examining table. "But as I'm sure you understand, if I should happen to simply stop breathing, then Ali and Rachman would see to it that you stopped breathing, not so simply perhaps, and your wife and children would be next. You'd better make sure that I continue to breathe."

"Of course. But if you could tell me whether . . ."

"I am in perfect health in every respect. Please proceed with the operation."

Berger began by altering the terrorist's hairline while waiting for the facial muscles to become relaxed and numb. Right away he looked quite different, and by the time Berger had completed the cutting, the tucking, and the small injections of silicone, the results were truly remarkable. His patient did not look like a movie star. He looked as though he had been in a bad fight. He did not even ask to see himself, but submitted to Berger's bandaging of his face and head with an air almost of boredom.

And then the real ordeal began, because when the operation was over he refused to leave Berger's office, and refused to let Berger leave, until the bandages were ready to come off. "That will take ten days," Berger protested. "I will be missed at home. I have appointments with patients."

"Call your wife," said the man. "Call your patients. Tell them you'll be out of town on some sort of emergency. And make it convincing, if you don't want your family shot down in the street."

Berger made it convincing. His staff and patients believed his story of a family emergency in foreign parts. His wife did not believe the tale he told her, that he was going to Eastern Europe for an emergency consultation, but neither did she suspect that he was being held prisoner in his own office. She thought, poor thing, that he had resumed his affair with Marcia. If they all got out of this alive, he would explain everything and make it up to her somehow.

Rachman and Ali came and went. They brought food; they brought new snapshots of Berger's family. One picture featured Rachman (or was it Ali?) holding out a lollipop to little Kimberly; to Berger's horror, she seemed to be accepting it. "You see," said the bandaged terrorist, "you see how easy."

And so for nine days and nights Berger endured the company of his patient. Sometimes they talked, without saying anything important. Sometimes they played chess. Berger always lost. No newspapers, no radio, the man would not allow them. Perhaps there was

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news about him. Perhaps he was being hunted. From time to time Berger showered, shaved, made notes on some old cases, looked out the window.

It was hard for him to sleep. First of all, he was afraid of being murdered. Then, too, the terrorist had commandeered the couch, leaving Berger to lie on the three chairs pushed together or on the floor, equally uncomfortable. Ali and Rachman took turns patrolling the office while the others slept.

On the morning of the tenth day, while the terrorist was in the bathroom and Rachman and Ali were out on some errand, Berger stretched out on the soft couch and fell into an exhausted sleep. He was still asleep when the terrorist emerged from the bathroom, removed his own bandages, and crept out of the office. His face had healed nicely. Berger would have been extremely pleased with the results of his work.

All the way down on the elevator the terrorist debated with himself whether to proceed with his plan for bombing the plastic surgeon's car. After all, the surgeon hadn't seen him with the bandages off; even he could not be sure of what he looked like now. It might be a waste of good explosives. Still, he had seen him before, could identify his picture perhaps, could tell them his face had been changed. Better go ahead with it. Ali and Rachman were to bring the explosives and meet him by the entrance to the garage where Berger kept his Mercedes.

Out in the street he glanced at his reflection in a window and found it piquant not to recognize the face as his own. And yet it was familiar somehow. Had he not seen that face before? The hooded eyes, the sensuous mouth . . .

He touched his face, rubbed the stubble on his chin. He needed a shave. The whiskers almost hid his new face. He looked like someone on the run, trying to conceal his identity with a young beard. He must hurry, get out of these clothes, get a shave.

Coming around the corner of the parking garage, he nearly collided with Ali and Rachman. They glanced at him and then away again, as one does at the sight of a stranger's face. Good. His own men had failed to recognize him. Then they looked again, and suddenly he realized whose face he had, as they reached with wordless rapture for their long knives.

He was wearing the face of Salman Rushdie. ●

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With eight novels behind her, Shelley Singer now devotes most of her time to writing fiction. Her early career as a reporter for UPI in Chicago prepared her well for a fictional life of crime, for it gave her an opportunity to interview figures from the city's underworld, including a killer on death row. The author has recently been branching out into short fiction with stories in two Sisters in Crime anthologies and in A Woman's Eye, *edited by Sara Paretsky . . .*

GIN RUMMY

by SHELLEY SINGER

I got the creeps the second I walked into that house.

Understand this: a homicide cop in a town like Chicago sees a lot of crazy, ugly stuff. I'm used to gore and screaming and blood all over the walls. But this place wasn't like that. It wasn't nauseating. It was creepy. In a dry, sour-smelling, everybody-here-died-months-ago kind of way.

The tiny house was one of those railroad jobs, where all the rooms are lined up front to back. We had to walk through a dim, overheated living room and a dirty kitchen to get to the corpse in the bedroom.

We almost missed the dog, a doberman, lying in a pile of dust bunnies behind the greasy overstuffed couch. He looked as old as the furniture. Thin, bony, he struggled to his feet when we came in, growled once, and dropped back to the floor muttering to himself.

When we walked into the kitchen, an orange cat hissed and crawled under a cabinet. The old avocado-green refrigerator hummed and wheezed but, if my nose was any judge, it was fighting a losing battle with the latest generation of rotting food. The ceiling light was on—a naked bulb that couldn't have been more than forty watts.

Baked beans were smeared across a paper plate that sat on the scarred Formica table. Next to the plate was a pile of mail that someone had been going through. An open bill sat on top. Third notice from the phone company.

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The bedroom was hotter than the living room, and crowded with the crime-scene team, an unmade bed, and the face-down body of the woman of the house. The tiny bathroom on the right exhaled cat-box fumes.

Beyond the bedroom was one more little room, where a man sat crying in front of a computer with a color monitor. Its brightness, the first real color we'd seen in the house, cheered me up a little.

I eyed the body on the floor. The woman was thin and dusty-looking, like the old dog. The exit wound in her back was pretty big. A .45 maybe?

The lab guys were drawing their chalk outline, dusting the doorknobs, taking pictures. I nodded at Bonetti from the medical examiner's office, who was opening the window. He nodded back.

"What's that in her hand?" I asked him.

"Gas bill."

A uniformed officer named Vronsky caught my eye and jerked his head in the direction of the room where the man was crying.

"James Holmquist. The husband. He wouldn't come out of that room, Dottie." That's me. Dottie Fairfax. My partner's name is Walt Menken. "Said he'd just wait there until we were finished. I told him . . ." He shrugged.

Walt and I stepped carefully around the forensic activity and peered in the door at the man. He was turning slowly in a black swivel chair. His wispy gray hair hung down around his face, a three-inch fringe growing from the edges of a bald spot that sat on the top of his head like a beanie—or a yarmulke, depending on your persuasion. The room was lit by a single lamp and by the computer monitor. The screen showed playing cards and a male cartoon head snarling, "Are you going to take a card or not? I'm getting bored."

Holmquist looked at us, but he couldn't seem to keep his eyes focused. They kept darting to one or another of the forensic team as they passed his field of vision, then shifting to the screen on the monitor.

"Mr. Holmquist?"

He stroked the plastic mouse plugged into his machine. His eyes shifted back to me. "Ma'am?"

"Mr. Holmquist, I realize how hard this must be for you, but we do need to ask you some questions. I'm sure you prefer doing it somewhere else? Maybe the living room?"

"No, I'll stay here."

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"We're in the way here, sir." I wanted to get him farther away from his wife's body, from the busy crime scene that was distracting him. "It's best if we go somewhere else."

He glanced once at his monitor, where the cartoon head was saying, "I'm gonna look at your cards if you don't make a move." He hesitated, bit his lip, and got up.

Stepping gingerly past the outlined body, his hand over his mouth, he led us back to the living room. The dog was snoring loudly.

I looked around for a lamp. The grubby curtains let in just enough cold gray winter light to show the linoleum-floored room to its full disadvantage. I counted five end tables, one with a broken leg and one with a lamp on it, two coffee tables, a couch, and a bunch of overstuffed chairs. Most of the wood wasn't wood. There was one of those floor lamps with the plastic table stuck halfway up the pole. All the flat surfaces held at least one empty glass candy dish, carved wooden box, ashless ashtray, or stack of newspapers.

I turned on the floor lamp. Just as we were settling Holmquist down in a bald brown plush chair, the uniform who'd been stationed at the front door came in with a tall skinny kid, a boy of maybe eighteen.

"Says he's a member of the family," he told us.

The boy had dull brown eyes and uncool no-style hair, long, colorless, and as stiff with dirt as his jeans. He pulled off his fleece-lined jacket. His black T-shirt had a hole near one armpit.

Holmquist nodded. "That's my son, Floyd."

"What's goin' on?" Floyd tried to look past us, toward the people in the bedroom.

"A burglar killed your ma," his father said.

Floyd just stared at him, as if he didn't understand the words. I wasn't sure he did.

"Sit down, please." I touched his arm. He pulled it away from my hand, but he did as he was told, dropping his jacket on the floor.

I looked directly into the father's watery blue eyes, the whites red with crying, and they shifted away to look out the window.

"You were sitting at your computer," Walt said, prompting.

"Yes. I told all this to the officers who came first."

"I know. Let's just run through it again. You were at your computer . . ."

"Playing gin rummy."

"And you heard something."

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"Running. I heard running. And I look around and I see my wife coming toward me and this big fellow after her."

My turn. "One man?"

"That's what I said!"

"Now Mr. Holmquist, I know you're upset . . ."

He glared at me.

"We're trying to catch the person who did this, sir."

He shrugged. His eyes shifted away again. Maybe "trying" didn't mean much to him.

Floyd spoke up. "Could I get, like, a glass of water? It's hot in here."

"Tell you what," Walt said. "I'll get you both a glass. Or a soda?"

Holmquist shook his head. "There's no pop. We're out of pop. Water's fine, like Floyd said."

"Floyd, do you live here, too?" My job has taken me to a lot of poor places, places where half a dozen people lived in a house this small.

Floyd snorted. "Oh, right. With my mommy and daddy." He grinned, showing green-tinged teeth. A couple were missing. When nobody smiled back at him, he sobered. "I got a place with a buddy, on the North Side."

"So the department reached you there?"

"Nah. Or maybe by now. I got a message from Pa, just get on over here, it said."

"When did you get the message?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe half an hour ago."

That squared. The call, from a next-door neighbor who'd heard a gunshot, had come in at 2:55. It was four now. I turned back to James Holmquist.

"So you heard running and you turned around and saw your wife and this man . . ."

"I saw my wife, running through the bedroom, and this man with a stocking over his head chasing her, waving a gun."

"And then what happened?" Walt's voice was soft, gentle.

"And then he shot her."

A couple of guys wheeled a gurney in the front door and through the living room. Holmquist watched them.

"She was running toward you, he was on the other side of her—the kitchen side—and he shot her? Is that what you saw?"

Holmquist stood up. He paced for a moment, not answering, rubbing his hands on his wrinkled tan pants. His tight, short-sleeved

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shirt had ridden up on his small potbelly. He yanked it down.

"Let me think a minute. I'm confused. I'm upset."

We let him think. They wheeled the gurney back through again, with the former Mrs. Holmquist in a body bag. Father and son watched her go, both of them pale and expressionless. Then James spoke, abruptly.

"Look, if it's all right with you, I'd like to sit in my study and answer your questions. I'm more comfortable there."

"Crime scene's taped off now, Mr. Holmquist," Walt said, returning with their glasses of water. "I'm afraid it will be a few hours before you can go through the bedroom."

The older man swung toward my partner.

"Oh no you don't. I want to sit in my study, with my computer. I need to sit in my study."

Floyd giggled. "He spends his life in there. In that room of his. Ma hated that."

"She hated you," James shot back. "Always stealing her money."

I waited for him to say more but he didn't, so I spoke up. "It's just until the lab people are finished—"

"Hell with that. You going to tell me I can't go outside my house, too?"

"Of course not, sir . . ." Walt sounded bewildered.

"Then we'll go around and go in through the back door."

"That'll be fine," I said before Walt had a chance to object. My partner looked at me as if I'd suddenly sprouted fur.

Holmquist marched out the front door and we followed him around to the tiny backyard, up a few steps, and in the back door, right next to his computer desk. The cartoon on the monitor was saying, "Is anybody out there? Should I go to lunch?"

Holmquist sat down in front of the machine, grasped the mouse in his hand and clicked, drawing a card from the pack on the screen, erasing the carping complaints of his electronic opponent. He sat half facing the screen, half facing us. There was only one chair in the room. Floyd squatted in a corner near the door. I propped my behind on a low bookcase next to a wooden disk-storage box and a stack of floppies. Walt stood with his arms crossed.

Holmquist had drawn a ten of spades. He discarded a king of clubs. He was holding garbage: sorted into ranks, the two of hearts, four of clubs, five of spades, eight of spades and eight of clubs, ten of clubs and ten of spades, jack of diamonds, queen of spades, nine of hearts.

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"Mr. Holmquist . . ." He ignored me, drawing a queen of hearts, discarding the nine. His movements with the mouse were quick, darting, and practiced. He drew and discarded a seven of diamonds.

"Mr. Holmquist," I persisted. "Please stop playing gin rummy and talk to us. He shot your wife and she fell—how?" And how did she get shot in the chest from behind?

His opponent drew and knocked with eight. The screen showed the score. Ernie fifty-nine, James zero. Holmquist was losing.

He tapped the mouse and the program dealt a new hand.

"Please, sir," Walt said softly. Floyd snickered.

"She fell down, over that way." He pointed with his right hand toward the side of the bedroom where the body had been found. With his left, he clicked the mouse and sorted the cards. This time he had an ace of diamonds, three fives—spades, hearts, and diamonds—the six of spades, seven of diamonds, nine of spades, ten and queen of hearts, and queen of clubs. He nodded at the monitor, pleased.

I gritted my teeth. "Describe the killer to us, Mr. Holmquist. Please turn away from the computer." I was thinking about how the bulls who worked on the force in the old days—the sixties, back when my dad was a cop—how they would have gotten this man to stop playing gin long enough to talk to us. I had a moment of perverse nostalgia for something I'd never known.

A lot of those little darting clicks. He passed. He picked up another queen, dumped the ten, drew and discarded, took the six of hearts.

More clicks. The cards were really flying. He had three fives, the six, seven, and eight of spades, three queens, and the ace. He knocked with one. The score was fifty-nine to eleven.

"That's better," he said. "I'm going to win this game." He was leaning more toward the monitor now, clicking away, starting another hand.

Walt moved a few steps closer to Holmquist. "Sir, if you don't stop that right now we'll have to take you down to the station where you won't be distracted."

Holmquist slued around and pointed at his son.

"He was the one. He was the man in the stocking mask. He shot her. He looked right in her face and he shot her. And I'm not going to any station."

Floyd's mouth dropped open, letting out a piggy squeal. He sprang up from his corner and grabbed the doorknob, yanking the door open and lunging onto the outside landing. Walt leaped after him,

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bringing him down. The struggle lasted for only a few seconds before he yanked Floyd to his feet, hands cuffed. Floyd had a bloody nose. Walt had somehow gotten a nasty cut on his forehead, but I don't think he'd noticed.

Floyd was whining. "I didn't do it, lady! I didn't kill her. He's crazy. He called me to come over."

I looked back at Holmquist. He was clicking his mousey way through another game. But he blew it and his cartoon opponent Ernie ginned, winning 106 to 11.

Holmquist cried out in pain and set up another game.

"Stop!" I said.

"Leave me alone!" He waved his free hand at my face.

"I said stop. Now."

"Why can't you just leave me alone!" he shrieked. I reached for the wall outlet and yanked the plug.

That really did it.

He howled and came at me, grabbing my throat. He was squeezing hard. I saw a blur that must have been Walt heading toward us, but before he could help I managed to break the man's hold, knee him, throw him, and cuff him.

Walt and I stood there, looking at each other, each with a prisoner. My throat hurt.

"I think you can probably let Floyd go," I told him.

I gave Officer Vronsky the number of a private animal shelter I know that keeps them until they've got homes. He said he'd make the call about the dog and cat.

We found the weapon, a .45. It was a big gun. It took up all the space inside the disk box on the bookcase, the one with the loose floppies stacked up next to it.

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John Suter's writing career began in 1945 when he sent a script to CBS radio's series Suspense *and immediately had the play accepted and aired. In the fifties, when such radio programs were gradually being overtaken by television, he decided to try his hand at short stories, which he's been writing ever since . . .*

THE SCYTHES HANG IN THE APPLE TREES

by JOHN F. SUTER

"Have you any idea who that woman is?" Huber asked.

The man in the newsstand leaned forward and looked to his left, following Huber's gesture. "Sorry. I have no idea," he answered.

It was not an unreasonable reply, Huber realized. The semirural shopping mall was small but busy. A bank and a large, spotless supermarket occupied the short arm of an L. The longer, two-storied arm housed a representative scatter of small shops, beauty parlors, and home-related outlets. An arcade ran from front to back in the center of the long arm, with the newsstand at the rear. The whole area was always well attended.

Huber was looking toward a semicircular outdoor terrace. It was shaded, forty feet in diameter, with a scattering of wrought-iron tables and chairs on its brick paving. Pastries and coffee could be purchased opposite the newsstand.

Huber's attention was focused on a woman getting up from a nearby table. Her loose-fitting jacket, skirt, and wide-brim hat were all white. A sleeveless pale-blue blouse was the only touch of color.

"She doesn't remind you of somebody from the movies?" Huber went on. "Long time ago?"

The dealer glanced again. The woman had now turned her back and was starting up some steps at the rear of the terrace. At the top, she could turn right towards an area of apartments and condos or go left to a retirement village.

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"Can't see her face, but when I could, she didn't seem familiar," the dealer said. His long countenance was expressionless.

"She has a paper," Huber said. "I thought you would remember her from that."

The vendor shrugged. "Nobody dressed like that bought from me. She must have brought it with her."

"My wife was a great movie bug," Huber said. "I went along with her when I could. That's where I think I remember that one from." He nodded towards the terrace. "She was that other foreign one. Not Garbo or Dietrich. Brid—no, Birgit Blom."

"Could be. I was never one for the movies. My wife was big on radio, then TV. Still is."

"I'm good on faces. Had to be," Huber confided.

The news vendor looked at Huber's rocky face. "You a cop?"

"Used to be. Retired. Philadelphia."

"Live here now? In town?"

Huber nodded.

"You and the wife like it here?"

"I do. She's been gone two years."

The other man's face showed regret. "Too bad. That woman brought back memories, huh?"

Huber looked at the empty terrace. Framed by the arcade, it resembled a stage. "You might say that."

I'd just like somebody to talk to.

Huber was at a table on the terrace reading *USA Today,* sipping a large black coffee, when she came down the back steps and crossed to a table opposite. He raised his eyes, but she gave no nod. She sat down, took a stenographer's notebook from her large shoulder bag, and began to write with a click-type pen.

He looked at her face with short, unobtrusive glances. Her hair, square-cut below the ears, could be either gray or white, but was colored pale blond. She had high cheekbones and sculpted lips. He gave her high marks: she had not attempted to deal with crow's feet around the eyes, faint lines in the forehead, and beginnings of grooves beside her thin nose.

Birgit Blom, it is you, his mind told him.

He looked down at the paper and wished that his wife, Margaret, still lived. She would know for sure, would even know what showbusiness gossip would tell her about why this screen favorite would

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be here. Visiting a friend or living in a nearby apartment or condo? Or, perhaps, in the retirement village?

He might learn the answer if they were acquainted. How to bring this about?

He tapped a large knuckle against his square chin. A thin device, but one never knew . . .

He stood up, leaving his paper and the unfinished coffee. Walking toward the arcade, he paused at her table.

"Excuse me for intruding . . ."

She looked up from her writing. "Yes?" Polite interest.

"If anybody comes out and wants to get rid of my paper and coffee, would you tell them I'm coming back? I just remembered something I need to buy in the hardware store in there."

He was trying to take advantage of the fact that table service was not offered, but that periodic policing of discards in the area occurred.

Strange that he had never thought of her eyes before. They were not heavy-lidded like Dietrich's, nor forever lovely, like Garbo's. They were green, and they seemed to know everything.

She lifted a hand. "It will be no trouble."

He thanked her and went into the arcade. As he turned into the store, he glanced back. She had given her attention to her writing again.

After allowing five minutes, he went back to his table. He called his thanks.

She gave the briefest glance. "It was nothing."

He finished the coffee and went on with his paper. From tiny glances at the other table, he noticed that she now had a small calculator at hand, occasionally entering data from the notebook.

Finally, he folded the paper and got up, picking up the plastic coffee cup, which he put into the trash bin near the woman's table. As he did this, he said, "Would you like to see today's paper? I've finished it."

She looked up, shook her head, and still gave him no more than politeness. "Thank you, no. I've read my own."

Her voice, he noticed, had no trace of accent. She could easily have lost it, in time, or she might have been a quick adaptor. She could even be able to recall it when it was needed.

"Really none of my business," he continued, "but you look very familiar. I'm Frank Huber. Mind telling me who you are?"

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She now looked at him very steadily. *Memorizing me, just in case.* "And who is Frank Huber?"

"Captain Frank Huber. Retired from the Philadelphia Police Department."

Her green eyes widened momentarily, then returned to normal. "*You can prove this?*" She gestured with her left hand. "You could be anyone. Trying to impress me. For who knows why."

He took out the folder he had been allowed to keep and showed her his identification.

She studied it, then looked up. "So, Captain Huber, what am I supposed to have done?"

She must have faced a lot of suspicion.

"Why, nothing," he said. "I used to go to the movies with my wife, Margaret, and you remind me a lot of that star, Birgit Blom. Are you that person? I won't spread it around, if you are. You might not want publicity."

Her smile was brief. Thin, he would have said. "No, Captain. I'm not Birgit Blom. I'm merely Frances Newton."

Huber murmured an apology and walked into the arcade. Was she merely a look-alike, close enough to fool his fantastic memory, or was she hiding behind a pseudonym to avoid publicity?

The next day it rained. Huber stayed in his small, in-town apartment, watching the educational channels on TV.

Sometimes he turned the set off and thought. If she was really Frances Newton, was she a widow? Had she ever had a lover? She hardly seemed to be what was once called a spinster. What was she writing down and calculating? He had glimpsed the notebook, and she had a list of some sort, names and figures.

Investments. Maybe unlike some entertainers, she wasted little or none of her salary. She had a list of possibilities and their returns and was calculating her best returns on capital.

That might be characteristic of Birgit Blom. Some Europeans were known for canniness in money management.

Talking with Frances Newton might, in the end, be a one-way street, but the challenge was keeping boredom away. The next day was warm and sunny, and Huber came to the terrace at his usual time.

Today, she was ahead of him.

He had varied his routine by clipping a personal cassette player to his belt and hanging the headphones around his neck. He carried

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a small pouch containing several jazz cassettes. He placed this on the table when he sat down.

He saw her watching him. She acknowledged him with a nod. "Good afternoon, Captain Huber. You like music?"

"Anything that's good jazz. Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Les Brown, John Coltrane. You get the picture."

Her hair swung briefly as she nodded. "I like nearly everything."

Wondering if this was an opening, he kept going. "There's a lot I never had time to hear when I was working. Now I'm trying to catch up while I still can. As my wife said now and then in her last year, *The scythes hang in the apple trees.*"

Puzzlement crossed her face. *"The scythes*—? I'm sorry."

"Means that life is on the edge of the harvest. Getting late. At least, that's what she said."

"Your wife had a vivid imagination."

He chuckled. "Well, yes. But she didn't make that up. She read it in a poem in a collection. A woman poet named Louise Bogan wrote it."

She turned her head away and stared at the sky. "I'm not sure that that line appeals to me. Poetry often brings us face-to-face with reality. That's good. But that line has a cutting image, and I don't relate very well to that."

She turned back. "And why aren't you in town, trading experiences with the other police, Captain?"

He shifted uneasily. "They really wouldn't want me hanging around. They'd think I was trying to tell 'em what to do. Besides, nowadays cops don't have time to sit around with their feet up."

"I didn't think of that," she admitted. "But then, perhaps it might help you if you met a woman a little bit younger than you are. I'm told that sort of thing is good for a man's ego."

He gave a small laugh. "Do you fit the description?"

She smiled. "Well, no. Maybe some of my friends . . . Now I've thought of something else. When you mistook me for Birgit Blom, you didn't consider everything."

"No? What did I miss?"

"A stand-in."

"A stand—" Realization came. "You mean a look-alike who's a live dummy for the actor while they set up the scene, the lighting, and all that?"

"That's the idea."

"Is that what you were?"

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"No, but I'm just showing you that things aren't always simple. I'm not even in her family, if that's your next thought. Now, would you excuse me—?"

Huber hated to stop. They might even end up as friends, but he could not force himself on her.

"Of course," he said, taking a Louis Armstrong tape from the pouch.

For the next twenty-five minutes, he listened to Satchmo, sitting with his eyes closed for greater intimacy with the performance. For a diversion, he had decided to take his car over some of the county's back roads that he had not yet explored. He clicked off the player when the side ended and looked around.

He glanced at the near table and paused in surprise. Frances Newton had company.

A slender, olive-skinned man in an off-white suit was seated talking to her. His left profile was turned to Huber. He was waving his left hand, which wore a large diamond on the third finger.

Huber eased the headphones above his ears and closed his eyes to slits. He recognized the other man.

"—is very generous," the visitor was saying.

Huber could not hear all of Frances's reply. "—lose control" were the only two words that came clear.

"Why care about control?" the visitor asked. "No more worries. No more responsibilities."

Huber heard no answer. He peered at her face. It was ashen.

"Tell you what," said the man in white. "We came at you cold. You think about it overnight. I'll come back same time tomorrow, see what you have to say. You'll agree. Nobody does anything against their best interest."

Huber slipped the headphones down, closed his eyes, and kept time to imaginary music with his fingers. He was banking on not being recognized.

After a five-minute wait, he clicked the player off, opened his eyes, and took off the headphones. Frances was still at her table, staring into the distance.

Huber stood up, gathered his cassettes into the pouch, and prepared to leave. He casually flipped a hand to Frances.

"See you tomorrow."

She made no effort to look at him, but he was certain she had said, little above a whisper, "Please do."

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As he entered the arcade, a question was still unanswered in his mind: What did she have to do with Salvatore Rossi, squeeze man for the biggest mob in south Jersey? Although they had never met, the hood's picture had crossed his desk in Philadelphia more times than those of his own grandchildren.

Before leaving his apartment the next day, Huber exchanged his cassette player for a look-alike tape recorder with a cordless satellite microphone. His headphones needed no trading. He also loaded his Police Special. All of this, plus a roll of duct tape and a roll of double-faced carpet tape, went into a small, heavy paper shopping bag with handles. He had found it easier to remove objects from such bags than from plastic, which slithered too much. He also carried a heavy walking stick, loaded at the top.

He made sure that he reached the terrace before Frances. Even so, he went to work on her table rapidly and efficiently. To be caught would blow everything.

First, he cut a small piece of carpet tape with a sturdy clasp knife. He stripped the protection from one side of the adhesive and put the microphone against it, leaving a small hole over the pickup. Then he exposed the other side of the tape. Holding it carefully, he dropped to one knee, reached under Frances's table, and stuck the assembly in the center.

This done, he went to his own table and rigged a sling underneath to hold his gun, still loose enough to permit a smooth draw. He then sat in a chair, stacked some cassettes before him, with the recorder beside them. He put on the headphones, apparently listening to jazz when the others would come.

Then he realized that he was a fool for not appealing for local backup. What if Rossi brought bodyguards this time? He could only hope that Rossi considered an ageing woman no threat.

Watching with eyes nearly closed, he saw her face in his mind's eye. Then something began to happen. He was no longer seeing her larger than life, up there on a big screen. Her face became smaller than life.

Suddenly he knew who she was.

At the time, he was aware that she had come down the back steps and was taking her place at the table. She glanced at him, but he gave no sign of awareness. He saw her hands tremble, regretted it, but moved no muscle of his own.

Five minutes later, Rossi entered from the arcade. He looked

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around, saw only Huber, who was apparently out of it, and crossed to Frances and pulled out a chair.

"Good afternoon," he said, sitting down. Huber heard him clearly.

She merely nodded. The reception made no change in the reptilian smile on his face.

"Have you reached a decision?" *Huber knew it was recording.*

"It's not enough. I couldn't even buy a new house for sixty thousand."

"A flat extra? Or is a percentage of the take on top of it what you want? I don't think we can go along with that," Rossi said, leaning forward.

"You need me to make arrangements and negotiations."

Huber admired the coolness in her voice. Rossi's answer, however, held a darker chill. "Don't be too sure you're needed. Besides, certain changes would have to be made, more to the way we handle things."

"Why wouldn't you want me with you?" Huber was confounded. Was she trying to join forces with the enemy?

Rossi laughed. "Lady, all you can offer is a list. Even income figures are no good. We'll make more than you do."

He went on. "Where is that list, by the way? In your bag? At your place?"

"Let my bag alone! The list is in my safety-deposit box."

"We'll just go there and get it, then. I'll give you the sixty when you hand it over." The flat menace was nothing new to Huber.

"What if I won't deal?"

"Listen, bitch, you'll live with pain the rest of your life. And you'll be glad to hand it over."

She began to plead. "See, that's what I mean. These are all good people. They don't have to deal with animals like you."

Contempt crept into Rossi's voice. "Hookers are all alike."

"Well, there's one thing you don't know, mister super-pimp. See that man over there?"

"That spaced-out—"

"That one. That one's a cop."

"Cop? You set me up, you bitch."

Huber tore off the headphones and drew the gun. Steadying it on the table, he shouted, "Hit the deck, Frances!"

Keeping the gun on the other man, he said, "Hold it right there, Rossi!"

The mobster froze. "Whatever you say, mister. Do I know you?"

"No. It's all on my side," Huber spat.

Frances inched backward on the floor, then got up, out of Rossi's reach.

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"If it makes you feel better, Rossi," Huber said, "she didn't set you up. I was onto you. I know all about you."

A voice from the arcade suddenly shouted, "What's going on out there? Put down that gun, or I'll call the cops!"

Surprise diverted Huber's attention momentarily. His head turned involuntarily.

Rossi saw it, turned swiftly, and raced for the steps.

Too long away from active duty, Huber thought, reaching for his cane. Grasping it by the point, he threw it end-over-end, with a follow-through.

The heavy end hit Rossi's lower spine just as his foot touched the lowest step. He fell forward, his head hitting the top step. He collapsed and was still.

Over his shoulder, Huber yelled, "Somebody call 911. And don't come out here. If you want to know, I *am* the police!"

Frances came over. "Keep your gun on him. I don't trust him one bit."

"I'm going to have a look," Huber said. "I think his luck's completely run out, but I want to be sure. Come along. I want to talk to you."

He went to Rossi, Frances a reluctant step behind. He felt the body's wrist, but no pulse was evident.

"Paramedics are probably of no use," he said, "but we'll leave it to them.

"Meantime," he went on, lowering his voice, looking at the small crowd in the arcade, "we have problems. *You* have problems. I've figured out who you really are. Your face *was* familiar, but not from the movies. From some fliers that went around when I was still in Philly.

"Your name is Faith Nelson, not Frances Newton. Or maybe it's the other way around. You're the Mayflower Madam of this part of the country. You have a list of housewives, college girls, and high-school girls you call on for so-called dates with well-heeled johns who want a special night out. Not in our jurisdiction then, but we knew you operated out of Paoli, got bagged and put out of business.

"Now you're here. Back in the business, else why is this scum here trying to buy you out? Am I right?"

She moved closer to him, put her arms around his chest, and nodded wordlessly.

"I have a lot to say to you," Huber went on. "You must realize

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that the mob won't let this alone. They know where you are—must have picked it up from some john or someone on your list."

"I'm only an unlisted number to all of my girls."

"You think. No matter. The cops won't love you, either, if they find out the truth. I can deflect that. I don't know why I should, but let's just say I'm stupid. Let's say this guy knew some dirt about Birgit Blom's past and was trying to put the screws on. He didn't know that you were only her stand-in—that yarn you tried to sell me, remember? I caught him in the squeeze and accidentally wasted him. I have it all on tape, but I won't use it unless I have to, because it's a different yarn. Understand?"

She was still shuddering against him. "Whatever you say."

"Now, the list. If it's really in a deposit box, leave it. All the notes and calculations—burn 'em, and fast."

"You can count on it."

"You'll have to cut all your ties here. You have money in the bank?"

"A lot of it. As Fern Nichols."

"Withdraw all of it. Have them give you a check. Choose some location where nobody knows you and mail the check to General Delivery there. Change your appearance as much as you can. Go to Goodwill and load up on scuffed-up bags and ordinary clothes. Oh—hold out plenty of cash for this and your final step. Go to a decent used-car lot. I hear that Horn's gives you a fair deal. Get something Mom and Pop, nothing flaky. You got any Nichols identity?"

"Driver's license."

"Use that. Then drive home with your Goodwill stuff. Pack and leave. Don't take anything with you, present car or any items that connect you. When you leave, go up through Jersey. They won't look for you in the lion's mouth. From there, go anywhere.

"Finally, don't ever do this again."

She began to cry. "I won't even think of it." She stopped, wiped her face, and looked at him again. "You seemed to want me in your life as a friend. Could we keep that up?"

He shook his head. "These scum will have an eye on me for a long time, hoping to find you. Better that you get out of here, up that back way, and call a cab to get started on your problems. Wiser that I never know what became of you. I can't even promise never to forget you."

He looked away. "After all, I found out today that my memory's no longer reliable. One of those scythes must have sliced off a little bit. Now, get going." ●

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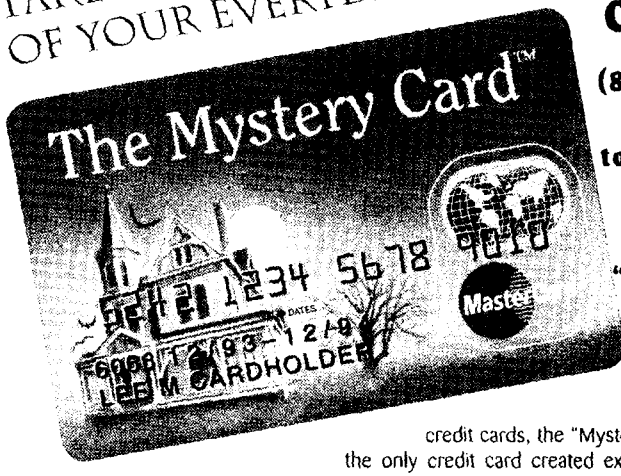

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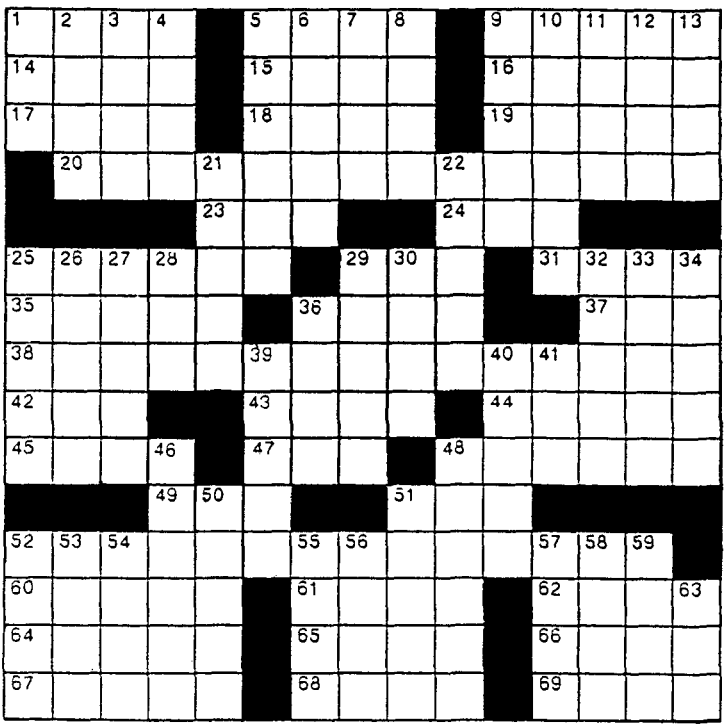
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 155

MEOW

ACROSS

1. *The Gondola* ——, Gash
5. Competent
9. Foils
14. Hall
15. Dam
16. Coeur d'——
17. *Might As Well Be* ——, Stout
18. French weapon
19. What to do with your subscription to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine!*
20. Feline co-author of 38 across

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23. Set
24. WW II craft
25. Mystery novelist Marian
29. Acted
31. Tiff
35. Edible bulb
36. The Venerable ——
37. Always, poetic
38. Postcard greeting?
42. *The Name of the Rose* author
43. U. Grant's foe
44. Ignited again
45. Lease
47. Work diligently
48. Muddles
49. Kay Scarpetta's Org.
51. Fabled bird
52. Heroine-sleuth in 38 across
60. Saying
61. Genuine
62. Mideast port
64. Morse's drink?
65. Ferrara family
66. Dry
67. Worries
68. *Miss Silver Comes to* —— Patricia Wentworth
69. Run

DOWN

1. "A —— tale's best for winter," Shakespeare
2. Hints
3. Arkin or Alda
4. Formed
5. Arouse
6. Aquamarine
7. Pliant
8. —— saw Elba
9. Hooks
10. Some are red
11. TV host
12. Recognized
13. Stitched
21. Antonym for ecstasy
22. Senior
25. Arbor
26. Have —— day!
27. Wild ox
28. Gutta mixture
29. Loser to Truman
30. Maigret's notion
32. Sir Robert's family
33. Lofty place
34. Weight allowances
36. Bear's opposite
39. Moabite woman
40. Set up
41. *Black as —— Painted,* Ngaio Marsh
46. Kind of practice
48. Creator of Easy Rawlins
50. Penned *Murder in Pug's Parlor*
51. Lariat
52. A fraction
53. Jewish month
54. Sometimes leads to murder
55. AKA Mars
56. —— *in Pieces,* also by 20 across
57. *Murder in the —— Room,* Elliott Roosevelt
58. River in western Germany
59. Emperor who had his mother killed
63. Catch

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News just in from the 1993 Shamus Award committee shows Doug Allyn on the list of nominees for best private-eye story of 1993 for "The Sultans of Soul" (EQMM, 2/93). Congratulations to one of mystery's best storytellers!

WRECKER

by DOUG ALLYN

She was a vision. Two hundred and seventy pounds of truck-stop waitress stuffed like a sausage into a pink polyester one-size-fits-nobody uniform. She plunked a platter of griddle cakes dripping in syrup down on the counter in front of Travis, and it was all he could do to keep from tearing into it with his bare hands.

"Damn, Trav," she said, "you look like you ain't had a square meal for a week."

"Haven't had time," Travis said, wolfing down a mouthful of warm dough so sweet it made his teeth hurt. "Been on the road off and on since sunup."

Myrna nodded, glancing idly around the nearly empty diner. "Long day and half a night now. Maybe you oughta pack it in. God knows I wish I could."

"I'm hopin' to catch another run before midnight," Travis said, washing down a gummy lump of pancakes with a gulp of scalding coffee. "Nobody to go home to anyway. My wife's down in Detroit with her folks."

"Don't blame her. You're here or out on the highway more'n you're home anyway. She gone for good?"

Trav hesitated an instant, a forkful of griddle cakes poised in midair. "No," he said quickly, surprised by how much the question stung. "Just for a week or so. Her dad's flower shop gets real busy this time of year, proms comin' up and all. She'll be back."

"Too bad. My cousin Lu's had the hots for you since high school. Says you're the closest thing to a star we got in Three Creeks."

"A star?" Travis echoed.

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"Sure. You come stompin' outta that big wrecker of yours with all them lights flashin' by the side of the road. Everybody slows down to check you out like you're Elvis or somebody. You gotta love it, right?"

"I must," Travis said grimly. "I sure can't be in it for the money. A star. Right. Grubby boots, greasy coveralls and all. Only they aren't looking at me, hon. They're rubberneckin' at the wrecks wondering what the heck happened, hopin' to spot a body or maybe some blood. It's a rush, you know? Driving by slow, figurin' death can't git you with your windows rolled up."

"My, my, didn't we get up on the gloomy side of the bed this mornin'."

"Darlin', I haven't seen a bed in so long I'd probably try to hook up to it and tow it away. Maybe you're right, I oughta call it a night." The phone rang at the end of the counter.

"Go ahead and answer it," Myrna said drily. "This time of the mornin' it's gonna be for you."

A drunk or a dreamer, maybe both, Travis thought as he eased his 7500 series GMC wrecker to a halt a couple of car lengths behind a Coca-Cola delivery truck parked on the shoulder with its emergency lights blinking. A sheriff's black-and-white was just ahead of it, gumball flashers revolving slowly in the darkness. Well off the road, half hidden by a stand of papery birches, a gray, two-door Chevy Lumina sedan was half hidden in the shadows. The driver's-side door was open and the trunk was up. Two men were standing near it with flashlights. One of them trotted back toward the road as Trav climbed stiffly down from his truck. Trav met him halfway to the wreck. The Coke-truck driver.

"Hey, Travis," the trucker grunted.

"Dooley, what's goin' on?"

"Stiff," the trucker grunted. "Sheriff spotted his car down there. I seen the prowl car parked, stopped to see if Herb needed help. Too late. Guy's dead as a beaver hat. Looks like he fell asleep, ran into them trees, broke his neck or somethin'. I gotta get back on the road. Tell Herb I'll send an ambulance along directly. Have fun."

"Right," Trav said gloomily as Dooley jogged off toward his delivery truck. Travis followed the ruts the Lumina had cut in the soft ground on its run into the trees.

Sheriff Herb Mackey rose from his knees beside the car door as Trav trudged up. Mackey was tall and rangy, with a farm worker's

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reddened hands and weatherbeaten face. "Damn," he said, brushing at the knees of his tan uniform trousers. "Grass stains. These are brand new pants, too."

"What happened?" Travis asked.

"The usual," the sheriff said, straightening slowly. "One-car accident. Guy was either stoned or fell asleep. Didn't have his seat belt fastened, so instead of walkin' away from it with his shirt wrinkled the dumbass breaks his neck and leaves me with forty pounds of paperwork to fill out and grass stains on my pants."

"Damned inconsiderate," Travis agreed, testing the ground behind the car with his boots. "Spongy. Have to use the bull winch to get it out." He circled around to the Lumina's passenger side to avoid looking at the corpse. The car bumper was resting against a slender birch. He knelt and flicked his penlight under the front end to make sure the undercarriage wasn't hung up. Nothing but wet grass. He walked back around the car, pausing a moment to flash his light inside the open trunk.

"Lose something?" Mackey asked.

"Just curious. Was the trunk open like this when you found it?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Doesn't look like it hit very hard, is all. Front end's barely scratched."

Herb shrugged. "Musta popped when he ran off the road. Or maybe he forgot to latch it. Like his seat belt."

"Must have, I guess," Travis said, looking up as the EMT ambulance crested the hill at seventy, lights and sirens wide open. It skidded to a halt behind Travis's wrecker, barely missing it. Two white-uniformed techs scrambled out of the vehicle. Trav knew the older man, a beefy Irishman named Hennigan. He didn't recognize the other one, a blond kid who came scrambling down the embankment carrying a medical bag. Herb glanced at Travis, rolling his eyes.

"No hurry, pal," the sheriff said. "The guy's gone."

"Are you sure?" the kid said, leaning into the car. "Did you try to revive him?"

"Revive him? Sonny, he's been dead so long I thought about callin' the historical society. I may be just a hick-town sheriff, but I know dead when I see it."

"He's expired all right," the kid said, easing back out of the car. "No offense, sheriff, but we can't be too careful."

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"Careful my butt," Herb snapped. "You wanna play doctor, do it on your own time. Meanwhile, how about you freight his carcass outta here sometime tonight?"

The kid started to reply but Hennigan cut him off and sent him back for a stretcher. "Easy, Herb, he's new on the job."

"Seems like everybody's new lately," the sheriff grumbled. "Maybe I'm just gettin' old. Nah, can't be. Old people are grouchy. Trav, let's get this sucker hooked up and haul it outta here before the state boys drop by and keep us standin' around all damn night while they double-check my work."

"You got it," Travis said. He wheeled and trotted back up to his wrecker, grateful to be moving. He released the winch, slung the heavy steel cable over his shoulder and started back down, dragging the cable behind him. The EMT techs were strapping the body onto a folding stretcher as Trav approached. He glanced at the corpse a moment, then hesitated. There was something . . .

"Who wants to know?" the dead man said.

Travis blinked. Shook his head. He took a closer look at the corpse's face just before Hennigan zipped the body bag closed over it. The dead man was mid-twentyish, dark hair, dark complexion. Latino. Juan. That was his name. Juan something. "Who wants to know?" That's what the dead man asked him the only time they met.

"Something wrong?" Herb asked, moving up beside him. "You look a little pale."

"Just tired, is all."

"You get used to it after a while," the young tech said confidently. "A body's just—"

"Sonny, Trav here's been haulin' wrecks off the highway since he was sixteen and he was in the army in Desert Storm. He's seen more bodies up close than anybody 'cept maybe your mama. Skip the lecture and haul the freight, okay?"

"Give us a hand up the bank, Trav?" Hennigan asked.

"Lug him yourself," Herb snapped. "Your buddy there's got air to spare."

Trav shrugged, grasped one side of the stretcher and helped Hennigan and the kid tote the corpse up the shallow incline to the ambulance.

"Thanks, Trav," Hennigan said. "Jeez, Herb's on a tear tonight, isn't he? I swear to God he hasn't said a civil word since that junkie shot him last year."

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"Bein' lamed up hasn't improved his disposition any," Trav acknowledged. "He doesn't mean anything by it."

"He had no call to yell at me," the young tech began.

"Yeah, well Herb was right about one thing, pal," Trav said, cutting him off. "You definitely have air to spare. See ya, Hennigan." He turned and trotted back down to the car.

Herb was checking the undercarriage when he got there.

"It's clear," Trav said. "Already looked." He dropped to all fours in the wet grass and slid the winch cable hook under the rear of the car, looped the cable around the frame and locked it on itself.

The sheriff climbed in behind the wheel of the Lumina and fired it up. "Ready when you are, boy."

Trav trotted back up to the rear of the wrecker, reset the winch ratchet, then pulled down the power lever. The bull-winch drum began to rotate slowly, grumbling, taking up the slack on the cable. When it was nearly taut, Trav waved at Herb, who shifted the car into reverse.

The wheels spun uselessly for a moment, then the cable snapped rigid, and the car began to crawl slowly up the bank. Herb gunned it now and then to keep it straight, but the winch did most of the work until the Lumina's front wheels finally found some purchase five feet or so from the shoulder. Herb wheeled it smartly up to the rear of the wrecker and climbed out.

"She's all yours, Trav, I gotta get goin'. I was on my way to another call at the south end of the county when I came across this one. Can you keep it tonight, drop it off at the station lot in the morning?"

"Sure, no problem."

"I'd appreciate it. It'd save me a trip to town to open the compound for you. No rush anyway. Mr. Stiff won't be needin' it anytime soon. Take care, boy."

"You too." Herb climbed into his prowl car and roared off, switching on his flashers as he crested the hill. Trav unhooked the winch cable and reeled it in. Then he climbed into his truck and gunned the wrecker around in front of the Lumina. By the time he hooked up the tow bar and set the safety-chain J-hooks, he barely had the energy to climb back up into the cab. He rolled both windows down and cranked the radio up, hoping the windblast and the music would keep him awake and alive on the long haul home.

Rumbling down the two-lane blacktop, nodding, bleary-eyed, Trav kept seeing the dead guy's face. Don Juan. That was his name.

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Nickname, anyway. His real name was Juan. . . . Still couldn't remember his last name. Only that it was Hispanic. He'd met him a few weeks back at Uncle Lat's car lot. A salesman. He was wearing a suit, no tie, open shirt, gold chains. And when Trav asked if Lat was around, Juan asked who wants to know? like he owned the place. Hell, maybe he did. With Uncle Lat, you never knew. He hired mostly ex-convicts to work on the car lot, washing cars, selling 'em, whatever. Juan was probably another one of Jack Latimore's losers. He definitely lost tonight. Big time.

The Lumina wasn't one of Uncle Lat's cars, though. It had rental plates. If they were legitimate. Maybe Juan was in the car borrowing business and the Lumina was headed for the lot to be chopped or resold. There were rumors about Uncle Lat. But in small towns like Three Creeks there were always rumors.

He eased the truck down the narrow drive beside his house to the parking area in back and thought about lowering the Lumina to take the strain off the truck springs. Heck with it. He'd be dropping it off in a few hours anyway. He locked the car up and trudged to the darkened house.

"Marinda?" No answer. He knew there wouldn't be. She wasn't due back from her folks' for at least a week. And as he glanced around the empty kitchen, he realized he might be seeing the future. This time she might not come back at all.

He rummaged through the fridge, came up with the last can of Budweiser, and carried it into the empty living room. Funny, with Marinda in it, the house had always seemed comfortable. Lived in. But now it just looked tacky, sagging couch, worn linoleum beneath the throw rugs. Marinda did her best, but the bottom line was, the little two-bedroom house was only a notch up from a backwoods shack.

Mutt, Trav's grizzled golden retriever, raised his huge head from his rug near the oil stove, eyed him a moment, thumped his tail once, then dozed off again, grumbling in his sleep. Hell, even Mutt was showing his age.

Temporary. That's what he'd told her when they bought this place. He needed room to park his trucks and he liked being out in the country, away from people. It was small, sure, but they could add on when the kids came.

But they didn't. Nearly six years, and no children. No medical reason for it, Doc Bremmer said. It would probably happen in time. His prescription: champagne, candlelight, and a triple-X video.

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Marinda hadn't smiled. And Bremmer only made it worse when he patiently began to explain his little joke. As though she'd just fallen off the tailgate of a migrant-labor truck. She walked out before he finished.

She never spoke of it again. She kept the books on their struggling trucking business, knew there was no money for specialists. But when her father mentioned that his office girl had quit and he was losing business at his flower shop because his English was so poor, Marinda jumped at the chance. She could help her father out and make the money for more tests.

But they fought about it. It began as a minor scrap, he didn't want her to go, and made the mistake of saying that kids didn't matter, that Marinda was the only thing in the world that truly mattered. Big mistake. In her pain she only heard the part about kids. And thought he really didn't want children, or at least not her children. And then it all came out. How lonely she felt in a white-bread town where people assumed she was somebody's maid just because she was Hispanic. . . .

Mutt was snarling, jumping up against the back door. Travis blinked and shook his head, trying to wake up. The couch. He must've fallen asleep on the couch. He'd been dreaming of Marinda. . . . But Mutt wasn't dreaming. He was going nuts, barking, snarling. Somebody was out there. He glanced blearily at his watch. Four freakin' A.M.?

Half awake, he padded to the back door and peered out. The yard was dimly lit by a single bulb mounted on the toolshed. He could see both of his trucks; the 7500 GMC wrecker and a tilt-bed Ford car-carrier. Everything looked okay—damn! The Lumina.

He'd left it hooked up to the 7500 but it was sitting on its own wheels now. Somebody'd released the winch, probably trying to rip it off. Couldn't see anybody. Maybe they'd gone. He opened the door to yell, but Mutt bolted out past his knees, barking. He was halfway to the Lumina when there was a blast of gunfire out of the dark and a slug spanged off the driveway a few feet from the dog.

Sweet Jesus! "Mutt!" Trav shouted, "come back, boy!" The dog either didn't hear him or was too excited to care. He barreled around the Lumina and disappeared into the darkness beyond. Dammit! Trav sprinted after him, his heart in his throat. If anything happened to that dog . . .

He heard a door slam and seconds later tires howled as a car roared off, pedal to the metal.

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"Mutt!" Travis yelled. After what seemed like an eternity the old fool came trotting back into the yard, his ruff still up, eyes ablaze, looking so fiercely pleased with himself Travis didn't know whether to hug him or slap him silly.

Mutt began nosing the ground around the Lumina and Travis got a flashlight and did the same. Whoever'd been messing with the car had released the winch to lower the car to the ground, but hadn't freed the J-hooks. Mutt's charge must've spooked them off. Kids, probably. Kids with a gun.

And with a slim-jim, too. The driver's-side door had been popped open and the hood had been released from the inside. Odd. You wouldn't have to get under the hood to hot-wire a Lumina, so why lift it? Maybe they just wanted the battery. Punks. Packin' iron just to steal a few bucks' worth of car parts.

Not much to be done about it now. Call the law. But first put the Lumina out of reach in case they were crazy enough to come back. He knelt and played the light under the car to check the T-bar hookup and the safety chains . . . and hesitated. Something was out of place down there. He played the light a little farther back. There, behind the air dam. Something was strapped to the frame with bungee cords.

Frowning, he moved to the truck and tugged the winch power-arm down just enough to raise the Lumina a few feet. Then he dropped to the ground and slid under the car. A metal briefcase was lashed to the frame just behind the dam. It wasn't visible from outside, but if you knew it was there, it could easily be unhooked from under the hood. He unstrapped the case, got out from under the car, and brushed himself and the case off.

It looked expensive. It was also locked.

He finished raising the Lumina, then padlocked the winch arm so it couldn't be released. He whistled for Mutt and trudged thoughtfully back to the house. He parked the briefcase on the kitchen table and eyed it a moment. Drugs? Probably. He considered opening it out of simple curiosity, and decided against it. Might mess up some kind of evidence. This was police business, and with his uncle's reputation and a couple of scuffles he'd gotten into after the army, Travis didn't need any trouble with the police.

It was nearly five by the kitchen clock. Herb would be on patrol till seven, though this time of the morning he'd likely be parked on a back road snoozing away the last hours of his shift.

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Tough. Trav wasn't about to risk trying to explain a briefcase full of whatever to some state cops. The way his luck had been running lately he'd probably wind up in jail for his trouble.

The phone rang. At five A.M.? Frowning, he picked it up.

"Travis?"

"Marinda? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Travis, somebody called here a few minutes ago, woke us up. He told my dad he was you and it was an emergency. When I answered, a man said you got something doesn't belong to you. He said you better keep it. Not give it to the police. Because he—he knows where I am. Travis, what's going on? Are you in trouble?"

"No, I . . . Look, there's no real problem, just some practical joker probably. This man, what did he sound like?"

"I don't know, I wasn't awake really. He had an accent."

Trav smiled in spite of himself. "An accent? What kind?"

"I don't know, strange. My English isn't good enough to tell accents."

"Honey, your English is better'n half my relatives', which isn't saying all that much. Look, there's nothing to worry about. I'll handle this. But maybe you should come home, huh? I'd feel better if you were here."

She didn't answer for a moment, and he felt his throat tightening. "If everything's okay, maybe I oughta stay here. My father still needs me and we . . . still need the money. If everything's really okay?"

"Yeah," he said slowly, "it's fine. I'll straighten it out in the morning. Look, tell your father I'm sorry about this. Go back to bed. I'll call you later. You take care now, hear?"

And he hung up. Knowing he should have said I love you. I miss you. Something. But he was afraid of what she might say. Or might not say.

He walked slowly back to the kitchen. To the briefcase. Uncle Lat's? It had to be. Who else would know where the car would be? And where Marinda was? Damn!

He grabbed a screwdriver out of a utility drawer, jammed it beneath the briefcase latches, pried them off, and opened it. Money. Not drugs. Cash, in neatly banded packets. He riffled through a couple of bundles, doing a quick count.

Roughly thirty thousand dollars in packs of twenties and fifties. Used bills. Untraceable. He hefted one of the packets. Five thou-

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sand. Enough for all the tests. . . . The phone rang. He picked it up warily. "Yeah?"

"Travis? Sheriff Mackey. Look, I'm sorry as hell to roust you out like this, boy, but something's come up."

"What's wrong?"

"A whole lot," Mackey said. "That stiff in the car this morning? He didn't die when he ran off the road. Somebody shot him in the head."

"Shot him?" Trav echoed, incredulous. "He hardly had a mark on him."

"Yeah. Professional hit, looks like. Small caliber, close range. No muss, almost no blood, no exit wound. That's why we and Hennigan both missed it. State police evidence team is out working the scene now, mad as hell because we moved the car. They'll want to go over it next, so you better haul it down to the county compound at first light. I'll open up for you. Can you make it by seven?"

"I'll be there, Herb."

Trav carefully replaced the receiver in its cradle. He crossed to the kitchen sink, eyeing the briefcase all the way. Thirty thousand. A lot of money. Enough to die for? Hard to say. He splashed cold water on his face, then stood there a moment staring at nothing.

Finally he wrapped the bungee cord around the briefcase to keep it closed, carried it out to Mutt's doghouse, and slid it inside under the straw. He climbed behind the wheel of the 7500, fired it up, and drove slowly out of the yard headed for Three Creeks with the Lumina in tow.

The lights were already on in the cinder-block building that housed Three Creek's four-man police station when Travis rolled up. Herb Mackey came limping out at the sound of the wrecker, stalked around the building, and unlocked the gate of the chain-link fence that surrounded the parking compound. Travis maneuvered the Lumina into a slot near the fence, eased it to the ground, and unhooked his towing rig.

Herb gave him a department receipt for the vehicle. The older man looked rumpled and weary, as though he'd been sleeping in an alley.

"Thanks for comin' down so early, Trav. Jeez, what a mess."

"What happened?"

"Intern at County General was checkin' out the body for practice, found the entrance wound, called the state cops. They're all over

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this thing now, and I look like a total zero. Well, maybe I am. I been a step slow ever since that little bastard shot me last year. Maybe I oughta pack it in."

"You can't quit, Herb. Hell, you *are* this town."

"You mean I was. Look at Main Street now. Boutiques, a candleria, ceramics. Town's changing. Yuppies movin' out here from Detroit and bringin' all its problems with 'em. They say they want law 'n' order but they really don't. They just wanna buy their nose candy from a guy with a clean shirt. Only I'm the one winds up with the gimpy leg. My daddy was a sheriff during Prohibition, but this friggin' coke trade is ten times worse. And now it looks like they're killin' each other on our ground."

"Is that what you think happened?"

"What else? Shot in the head like that? These guys are stone pros, Trav, and I'm gettin' too old and slow to mess with 'em. City council's talkin' about dissolvin' our department altogether and contractin' with the state police. Maybe it'd be best. I'd hate to end up like that poor sucker in the car."

"Have they identified him yet?"

"Nah, no ID on him and these wetbacks all look alike. I expect his prints'll be on record someplace. Sorry about that wetbacks crack, Trav, I didn't mean your wife, of course. Her family are workin' people. But you know what I mean."

"Yeah," Trav said evenly. "I guess I do. See you, Herb."

Someone was in Uncle Lat's office. As Trav eased the wrecker into the drive of Latimore's Dream Machines car lot, he saw a shadow moving behind the window curtains of the small office trailer Lat used to close deals. It was barely eight o'clock, too early for Lat to be here, but somebody was definitely inside.

He slowed the truck to a halt, climbed quietly out of the cab, and took a tire iron from beneath the seat. He moved silently to the trailer's only door, jerked the door open, and vaulted inside. And found himself staring into the muzzle of a Browning nine-millimeter automatic.

" 'Morning, Uncle Lat. Sorry I forgot to knock. But I think it's illegal for felons to own firearms, isn't it?"

"I'd rather get caught with a piece than without one," Jack Latimore said, lowering the weapon. "You stupid bastard, Trav, you're lucky you didn't get your head blown off. What are you doing here this time of the morning?"

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"I could ask you the same thing."

"I've been living here the last week or so. Clarisse and I had a blowup. She's got a new boyfriend. I thought you might be him. Coffee's on if you want it."

"Living here?" Trav said, helping himself to a Styrofoam cup of black coffee from the Bunn-omatic. "What's the deal? You homesick for jail? This place can't be much bigger than your cell at Jackson. It's even got bars on the windows."

"The bars are to keep people out, not in."

"There's a difference?"

"Yeah, I've got the key." Lat shoved the pistol into a desk drawer and resumed shaving with an electric razor. He was taller than Trav, but there was a strong family resemblance, high cheekbones, sandy hair. "You didn't answer my question," Lat said. "What are you doing here this early?"

"We have a problem, you and me. A big one. You've got a salesman working for you. A guy called Juan something?"

"Juan Canales? Fired him last week. What about him?"

"Why'd you fire him?"

"That's my business. What's the problem?"

"He's the problem, or part of it. He's dead."

"Dead?" Lat said, pausing with the razor in midair. "Dead how?"

"Somebody shot him in the head out on Southfield Road last night. You want to tell me why you fired him now?"

"I . . . Mostly I didn't like the company he was keeping. He's an ex-con. Not somebody I knew from the joint, but we knew people in common. I remember what it was like trying to get a job with a prison record, so I hired him. Only he wasn't really interested in gettin' straight. He wanted me to go into business with him."

"What kind of business?"

"Drugs. He figured the car lot would be a perfect front. Maybe he was right. Problem being, since I did time for roughin' up a state trooper, every cop in the state's got me on his list. One step outta line and I'm back inside. Juan wouldn't take no for an answer, so I cut him loose."

"Last week?"

"That's right. You said he was only part of the problem. What's the rest?"

"Money," Travis said. "He had a briefcase full of cash stashed in his car. Somebody made a try for it last night at my place. I found it after I ran 'em off."

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"I see," Lat said slowly. "And you're here because you think I might be mixed up in this somehow?"

"Juan works for you."

"Not anymore. Turn the money over to the cops. It's nothing to me."

"Isn't it? My wife phoned me from her folks' place in Detroit. Somebody called there, a guy with an accent. He said I'd better not turn the money over to the police, that he'd be in touch."

"Sweet Jesus," Lat said softly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But I also wondered how Mr. Accent knew where Marinda was. It's not like I took out an ad in the paper saying my wife left me, you know? But you knew."

"I told you I've got no part in this," Lat snapped. "But whether you believe me or not's the least of your problems. These people Juan was mixed up with are dead serious gangbangers. They'll kill you for a two-dollar bet."

"You know who they are, then?"

"I know a few names, sure. And I know their reputations. Ugly. Real ugly. Do you still have the money?"

"Every dime."

"How much?"

"Thirty thousand, in twenties and fifties."

"Thirty? Are you sure you got it all?"

"Pretty sure. I went over the car pretty carefully. Why?"

"Because thirty grand is chump change if it's supposed to be for a drug deal, only . . ."

"Only what?"

"That was the figure Juan offered me to buy into the lot. Thirty grand up front."

"But you turned it down?"

"That's right. Hey, Trav, I'm no choirboy, but I'm not a dope dealer either. Thing is, since I turned him down, I wonder who the money was for?"

"Maybe he was ripping 'em off and they caught him at it?"

Lat nodded. "Maybe, but I don't see how. The two of us were the only ones who knew about the offer, and I sure as hell didn't talk to anyone about it. No, something else had to be going on. And we'd better find out what it was or we could both end up like Juan. Do you have the money with you?"

Trav hesitated. "No," he said.

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"You really don't trust me, do you," Lat said, smiling thinly. "Good. Shows you're growin' up. Look, I don't want the money, I just thought you might want to stash it in my office safe," he said, nodding at the gun-metal gray Mosler safe set into the wall behind his desk.

"It's fine where it is," Trav said. "And I didn't say I didn't trust you. I just don't have the money with me."

"Suit yourself. I'd better head into Detroit, talk to a few people, see if I can straighten this out or at least get a line on what's up. This guy that called, when's he gonna call back?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then I wouldn't get too far from a phone if I were you. I'll be in touch." Lat slipped into a dark gray Armani sportcoat and checked himself in a small wall mirror. Then he took the automatic out of his desk, thrust it into his waistband, and buttoned the jacket over it. "I'll call you when I know anything. If I don't call by tonight, you better figure things have gone bad and you're on your own. But one last thing, just for the record . . ." He opened the trailer door.

"Hey! Stokey! Come here a minute." Tommy Stokes, the moon-faced, mentally handicapped giant who washed the cars on the lot, trotted up to the office trailer. He was still holding his sponge, soap-suds dripping from his fist down the front of his coveralls.

"Yeah, Mr. Latimore?"

"Stokey, does Juan Canales work here anymore?"

"Juan?" Stokey said, frowning. "No. You fired him after . . . You know. After the trouble last week."

"That's right, I did, didn't I," Lat said, glancing pointedly at Trav. "Look, Stokey, I got business outta town. You lock up when you finish washing the cars. Anybody shows up, tell 'em I'll be back tomorrow. And that's all you tell 'em. Got it?"

Stokey nodded. "Right, back tomorrow, and that's all."

Lat stalked over to a '91 fire-engine-red Corvette, fired it up, and roared out of the lot.

Trav watched him go, then wandered out to where Stokes was wiping down a black Camaro. The giant's hair was cropped in an institutional brushcut. His navy blue coveralls were the largest Lat could find, but the sleeves still only reached halfway down Stokey's massive wrists. "Yo, Stokey," Trav said, leaning against the next car in line. "This hassle Uncle Lat and Juan had, pretty serious was it?"

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"I guess so," Stokey said, smiling vacantly. "I mean, sometimes Mr. Latimore yells at me too, but he never fires me."

"What were they yelling about?"

Stokey blinked, his smile fading, a feral wariness in its place. "Me, mostly. Mrs. Latimore was looking at a car in the lot and ol' Juan went up and talked to her. You know, leanin' real close? So I told him knock it off, let her alone. And he . . . called me a lotta names, dummy, the usual stuff. Next thing I know, Mr. Latimore grabs him, knocks him flat in my rinse bucket."

"Uncle Lat decked him? But if the trouble was over you, Stokey, why didn't you deck him?"

"I promised Lat I wouldn't hit nobody no more," Stokey said, wiping the Camaro down fiercely, as though he was trying to erase its paint. "Don't wanna go back to jail."

"No, I imagine not," Trav said. "Just one thing, are you sure the trouble was about you? Or was Uncle Lat a little mad because Juan was talking to Clarisse? Was ol' Don Juan her new boyfriend, maybe?"

Stokey didn't look up, just kept wiping the car down. But the flush that rose above the collar of his coveralls told Travis all he needed to know.

Trav's battered wrecker looked out of place on the boulevards of Eastpointe Manor subdivision. The homes were multilevel brick and stone, with three-car garages. Travis parked at the curb in front of a New England saltbox with fieldstone facing. It was a sixty-yard stroll across the lawn to the front door, but he didn't have to go that far. A woman was gliding along on a lawn tractor deluxe, mowing the already immaculate grass. She was rangy and blond, barefoot, in white tennis shorts and a pink champagne halter top. "Clarisse?"

She didn't look up and Trav noticed the headsets half-concealed in her tousled pixie hairstyle. He walked over and stopped directly in the tractor's path. She glanced up, smiled, and eased the machine to a halt, letting it idle.

"Hey, Travis, how's my favorite redneck step-nephew?"

"I'm good. How you makin' it?"

"Bored out of my skull, obviously, or I wouldn't be playing gardener," she said, waving at the lawn. "Did Lat send you over to talk sense into me?"

"No, he doesn't know I'm here. Look, I may be out of line, but I need to ask you about something. This trouble you two are having, does it have anything to do with Juan Canales?"

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"Lat didn't tell you that," she said positively. "Damn this two-bit little burg. Everyone's nose in everyone else's business."

"Yeah, well, you know me well enough to know I didn't come over here just to gossip. It's important. What happened with Lat and Juan?"

"I'm . . . not sure. I stopped at the lot early last week to have Stokey wash my car. And Lat saw me talking to Juan, and . . . lost it a little, I guess."

"Just for talking to him?"

"Well, maybe I was standing a little too near," she said, unfolding her lanky frame from the tractor and moving close to him. "A bit like this. And Juan was kind of whispering in my ear, like this."

He could feel her breath on his cheek. "Lighten up, Clarisse," he said, stepping back. "What are you doing?"

"Going up the wall," she sighed, sinking languidly to the tractor seat and eyeing him over her sunglass frames. "I was bored, thought I'd get a rise out of Lat by flirting with Juan, only Stokey butted in and then Juan and Lat got into it and forgot all about me. Funny, when I met your uncle he was fresh out of the joint for beating his ex-wife's boyfriend half to death and busting up a cop who tried to break it up. I thought he was exciting, a little dangerous maybe. But lately, all he cares about is business."

"He may be more dangerous than you think," Travis said carefully. "Clarisse, Juan's dead. He was shot last night out on Southfield Road."

"My God," she said, swallowing. "Who . . . Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet, no."

"But you think Lat might have done it?" she said wonderingly. "That's why you're here?"

"I don't know. I've got troubles of my own that are mixed up in it."

"Lat had nothing to do with it," she said positively, taking a deep breath. "No chance. He still has nightmares about being in prison. He wouldn't risk going back for anything."

"Not even for you?"

"Especially not for me," she snapped. "He doesn't care enough. Maybe my talking to Juan set something off between them, but it was already coming. Whatever the trouble was, it wasn't just about me."

"Then what was it about?"

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"I don't know. Some kind of business thing. When Lat told Juan he was fired, Juan said he didn't need him anyway, there were more fish in the sea, or something like that. And he told Lat he'd better keep his mouth shut if he wanted to stay healthy. At which point Lat picked him up and pitched him into Stokey's rinse water. Stokey laughed, you know what he's like, but I saw Juan's eyes. If anybody was going to shoot anybody, it would have been Juan coming after Lat."

"Maybe he did."

"On Southfield Road? What do you think, they met out there in the middle of no place and fought a duel or something? Not likely. Lat wouldn't have gone after Juan Canales, Travis. If Juan had come after him and gotten shot for his trouble, it wouldn't surprise me. But not the way it happened. Are you going to see Lat today?"

"I'm not sure. I'll probably talk to him."

"Good. You tell him to call me. And remind him what a great time we had together last night. Right here. All night."

"Look, we both know that's not true and there may be more going on than either one of us understands. I'm not sure your giving Lat a phony alibi is such a hot idea. You could be buying yourself a world of trouble."

"What makes you think I'm doing it for him? Maybe it's for me. You just tell him, okay? Any problem with that?"

"I've got problems by the truckload," Travis said grimly. "But none with you, Clarisse. I'll see you."

Something was wrong. Big time. Travis sensed it as he parked the wrecker beside the car carrier in his backyard. He sat there a moment in the truck's cab, ears ringing in the sudden silence, scanning the house and yard, trying to put his finger on it. There were no other cars, everything looked normal . . .

Mutt. He was lying half out of his doghouse. And he was still. So very still. He hadn't raised his head when Trav's wrecker rolled up. Trav watched him for several moments, hoping, but the old dog didn't move.

Trav reached down and took a three-foot steel breaker bar from under his front seat, climbed down out of the cab, and walked slowly to his dog.

He knelt beside him and gently stroked his grizzled head. There wasn't much blood. No more than there'd been on Canales. But Mutt was dead. Shot just above his right eye with a small-caliber weapon.

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Maybe a twenty-two, judging from the size of the wound. He was only halfway out of his doghouse, and he would have come charging out at the sound of a strange car. So whoever did this either shot him from the road before he pulled into the driveway. Or Mutt recognized the car.

Trav glanced back along the drive to the street beyond, gauging the distance. Twenty yards, maybe twenty-five. Not an easy shot, but not difficult for a serious marksman. But it would've been much easier close up.

He reached past the dog's body beneath the straw in the doghouse. The briefcase was still there. Thirty thousand. And if it would have brought Mutt back for a five-minute romp, Trav would gladly have burned every filthy dollar of it.

He rose slowly and trudged to the house, fairly sure of what he'd find. The place was a shambles. Furniture slashed, bedding torn apart, every drawer, every closet cleaned out and emptied into a pile in the center of each room. Even the bathroom sinks and the toilet had been torn out and dumped. A steady stream of water was flowing from the broken bathroom fixtures into the living room and running down the nearest heater vent.

Sweet Jesus, what a mess.

Trav stalked to the utility room and turned off the main water intake valve. Then he checked the telephone. Still intact. He opened a kitchen window and placed the phone on the ledge so he could hear it in the yard. And then he went out to the toolshed to find a shovel.

He buried Mutt behind the house on a knoll overlooking the rough country that rolled away to the west. He didn't bother to mark the spot. He'd remember it. This little patch of ground had been Mutt's domain. He knew every inch of it, every rabbit burrow and bird's nest, the cedar grove where a herd of white-tailed deer bedded in the fall. Mutt had claimed and defended this territory for his clan, for Travis, and Marinda, and himself. A wizened old warrior from the Grand Army of Dogs. And if there was any justice in this world or the next, his spirit was still roaming these hills.

Trav heard a car pull into the driveway and crunch to a halt beside his wrecker. He picked up the spade, hefted it, then jogged back to the house, keeping the toolshed between himself and the car. He flattened his shoulders against the toolshed wall and worked his way to the corner. Then stepped out.

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A midnight-blue state police cruiser was parked in the yard, two uniformed types moving warily toward the house. A tall, linebacker-sized Swede, blond, ruddy . . . Nordstrom, that was the name. His partner was a squat block of a man, dark complected, with an acne-pitted face. Falcone. Trav had seen him around, never talked to him.

" 'Morning, guys. Something I can do for you?"

"Travis," Nordstrom said, turning to face him, "we'd like to talk to you. You alone?"

"I was until you got here," Travis said. "What's up?"

"We'd like to ask you a few questions. Kind of a warm day, why don't we talk inside?"

"Nah, place is a mess," Travis said. "My wife's away. And to be honest, I'm kinda busy. Been doing some spring planting. What's on your mind, Nordstrom?"

"Your uncle," Nordstrom said. "Stokes, the retard that works for him down at the car lot, said you talked to Lat this morning and he left right after. Is he here?"

"Nope," Travis said. "Is that it?"

"It's not that simple, Travis," Nordstrom said. "This is a murder investigation. The guy who got whacked out on Southfield last night was named Juan Canales. He was an ex-con who worked for your uncle. There was trouble between them, and now Lat's dropped out of sight. You've got to admit, it looks suspicious."

"Depends on your point of view. For openers, most of the guys who work for my uncle are ex-cons. He hires 'em because no one else will. And as far as I know, Lat hasn't disappeared, he just went out of town on business. Said he'd be back tomorrow, maybe even tonight."

"*He* said," Falcone echoed sarcastically. "And what if he doesn't come back?"

"Then I guess there'll be an extra drumstick at my granma's come Christmas. But for the record, Canales didn't work for Lat anymore. He fired him last week. Said he didn't like the company he was keeping."

"Like his wife, you mean?" Falcone said.

"I wouldn't say that to him if I were you," Travis said evenly. "And I think I just ran out of small talk. If you don't mind, gentlemen, I've got work to do."

"You know, Travis, I don't like your uncle much," Falcone said. "I don't like the ex-cons he hires, and I especially don't like his

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redneck relatives covering for him and blowing us off. This used to be a quiet little county. Even a putz like Herb Mackey and his hobby cops could handle it. But not anymore. We're talking about murder here, professional from the look of it. And your uncle's the only guy I know that has professional goons working for him. I think you know more than you're telling us. A whole lot more. Get your coat. You're coming with us."

"Look, I . . . really can't leave right now," Trav said. "I'm expecting a call."

"You can leave if we say so, and I just did. Put that shovel down and turn around."

Trav glanced at Nordstrom for help, but the older cop's face was closed. He wouldn't interfere. And Marinda could be calling at any time. Falcone pointedly rested his hand on his weapon. He was hoping Trav would resist. It showed in his eyes.

Dammit. Trav reluctantly tossed the shovel aside, then turned his back and raised his arms as Falcone frisked him none too gently.

"We could've done this easy, you know," Falcone said coolly. "Maybe next time—"

The squad car radio crackled to life. Nordstrom leaned in the front window and picked up the hand mike. "Four twenty-six."

Trav couldn't make out what the dispatcher said, but Nordstrom immediately jerked open the door and slid behind the wheel. "Cut him loose, we got a felony hot pursuit. Let's go!"

"We'll be back," Falcone shouted over his shoulder as he scrambled into the shotgun seat. Nordstrom slammed the car into reverse, spraying Travis with gravel as the car roared out of the drive. The squad car spun a half-U when it hit the road, then sped off, its siren echoing off the surrounding hills like a banshee.

Trav stood there a moment, dazed by the suddenness of it all, then dusted himself off, picked up the shovel, and put it in the toolshed.

He was eyeing the mess in the kitchen, trying to decide where to begin, when the phone rang.

"Travis?"

"Marinda? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, but—the man called again just now."

"Go ahead."

"He said he wanted you to deliver the package. He said to drive to the Lookout Point picnic area, and drop the case in a wastebasket there, then drive south out of the hills. He said he'd be watching

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you, and that somebody's watching me. Travis, please, you gotta tell me what's going on."

"Marinda, it's gonna be okay, just settle down. Do you think you'd know if somebody was watching the shop?"

"I'm pretty sure I would. I grew up in this neighborhood and I been looking all morning. I haven't seen nobody we don't know."

"Good. Maybe there won't be. One last question. You said the man spoke with an accent. Is he Hispanic?"

"No, course not. That wouldn't be an accent to me. I don't know what kinda accent it was, just . . . I don't know. Strange. Kind of . . . mumbled."

"Mumbled? Could he be mentally handicapped maybe? You know, like Stokey?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, I think I'd know Stokey's voice. Maybe if I listen to it again."

"Yeah," Travis said grimly, "you do that. Meanwhile, be careful, but don't worry. Everything's gonna be fine. I'll take care of this. I'll call you later."

"Travis—"

"I gotta go, hon. Take care." He hung up the phone, then stood there a moment, looking over his ruined home, yet not really seeing it. Then he stalked out to the toolshed, grabbed an acetylene welding rig, and loaded it into the back of the wrecker. He climbed into the cab, fired it up, and headed out. But not toward Lookout Point.

He drove slowly a half-mile or so toward town. Then he eased the wrecker off the road onto the shoulder, slowed to a halt, and shut it off.

It was a lonely spot. The hills loomed above him to his left, and the brushy valley rolled away to the west. A hawk was circling lazily in the azure sky, hunting. Trav glimpsed a shadow gliding through the underbrush in the distance. Probably a deer. But he pretended it was Mutt, or his ghost, roaming wild, truly free at last.

Twenty minutes passed. Twenty-five. And then a car crested the hill, pulled up behind the wrecker, and stopped. A police car. Black and white. Herb Mackey climbed stiffly out and walked up to the wrecker's cab.

"Travis? What's up? Car trouble? Want me to call you a wrecker?" The old man smiled, a rictus of a grin that held no warmth.

"Nope, I've been sitting here waiting for you, Herb. I'll need your help to get the money."

"The money? What money?"

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"Your money, Herb. The cash Juan Canales was bringing you last night. Thirty grand. Not enough for a serious dope deal, but enough to buy a small-town cop. Only you weren't really for sale, were you Herb? You figured you'd pop him, keep the money, and if anybody took a fall for it, it'd be my uncle."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do. When my uncle fired Canales, Juan said he didn't need him, that he could do business anyway. A week later, he gets popped carrying a thirty-grand payroll. So who was it for? My uncle? Nah. After the trouble between 'em, a hardcase like Juan wouldn't let my uncle walk up to him on a deserted road. But you could have. Especially if you were the guy he was meeting.

"And then there was the phone calls. To my wife, not to me. The first one could have been a threat, to prove the shooter knew where she was, but after that, having Marinda relay the messages only complicated things, especially since her English isn't so hot. Why bother? Unless the caller knew I'd recognize his voice. Marinda might not have recognized Uncle Lat's voice with a phony accent. But Lat wouldn't have had to shoot my dog. Mutt wouldn't have bothered him. And Lat definitely couldn't have drawn off those two state cops just now. Only you could do that, Herb. And you had to. If they'd hauled me downtown, I might've given up the money and told them everything. So you called them off. How did you do it?"

Herb hesitated, then shrugged. "A crank call. We get 'em now and then. You always were a bright kid, Travis, too bright to settle for bein' a wrecker jockey. So. What do we do now?"

"We get paid, Herb. The money's in the safe in my uncle's office trailer. I'll have to break in to get it, but that's no problem, the lot's closed and I've got a cutting torch to open the safe. But I'll need you to stand guard, run anybody off who gets curious. Like the state cops."

"And then what?"

"We split the money. Look, Canales was nothin' to me. Far as I'm concerned, you did the world a favor. All I want is a cut. Say five thousand?"

"Only five?"

"I'm not greedy, Herb, and I'm not interested in ending up like Canales."

"You needn't worry about that, Trav. Hell, I'm not some psycho junkie. I've had a rough go since that punk shot me last year. All that time in the hospital I kept thinkin' he coulda crippled me,

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maybe killed me, and for what? The kid was eighteen, never worked a day in his life. And he had a new car and more walkin'-around money than I earn in a year. Dammit, that just isn't right. So I decided to even the score. Way I figured it, somebody owed me a payday for this bum leg of mine."

"I can understand that," Trav said. "What happened?"

"I put the word out, cop for sale. And Canales bit. Offered to pay me off to look the other way once in a while. I pretended to go for it. Only I paid him off instead."

"What went wrong?"

"I pulled him over on Southfield Road, like we'd agreed. He said he had the money with him, and I didn't take any chances, I popped him right away. Only I couldn't find the damn money and then Dooley stopped to help. I figured my best chance was to have you haul the car to your place overnight so I could get another crack at it. Mighta worked, except for your dog. I'm sorry about messing up your house, Trav, and about the dog. But you've gotta understand I'm in a pretty tight spot here."

"I guess we both are," Trav said neutrally. "I can always get another dog with my cut of the money. Do we have a deal?"

Herb nodded. "You go on ahead. I'll be right behind you."

Travis pulled the wrecker into the Latimore's Dream Machines lot and parked beside the small office trailer. Herb rolled slowly to a halt in the driveway, blocking it. And then he sat there watching. Waiting.

Trav scanned the lot. No one around. He climbed out of the truck, grabbed the portable acetylene cutting rig out of the back, and walked to the trailer. It was a crude affair, a single door, windows at either end burglar-proofed with grillwork. The base of the trailer was skirted with cheesy aluminum siding.

The door was locked, but the doorframe was aluminum. Trav flicked on the torch and narrowed the flame to pencil width. It took less than thirty seconds to cut the jamb plate neatly out of the wall. He glanced over at Herb but the older man's face showed nothing.

Trav stepped into the trailer, closed the door, and used the chain lock to hold it shut. Moving quickly now, he trotted to the tiny half-bathroom in the rear, set the doorknob lock mechanism and closed the door, locking it. Then he wrestled Lat's desk against the wall, relit the torch, and began cutting an eighteen-inch circle through the floor where the desk had stood.

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Acrid, greasy smoke from the burning carpet rolled up from the cut, quickly filling the tiny room. Trav folded his arm over his nose, trying to filter the stench. Fortunately, the floor was as flimsy as the rest of the trailer, and in a matter of minutes the circular cutout fell through to the concrete below.

God, it was gonna be tight. Trav thrust the cutting rig down the hole, then followed it, feet first. The crawlspace beneath the trailer was exactly that, barely two feet high.

Sitting on the ground with his upper body through the hole, Trav tugged Lat's desk back over the cut. Then he lay flat on his back, flicked on the torch, and quickly tacked the plate back into place with a couple of spotwelds.

It wouldn't fool Herb for long, but maybe, in a smoke-filled room that was obviously empty, he'd focus on the only place to hide. The locked bathroom.

As his eyes adjusted to the dusty darkness under the trailer, Trav spotted a sliver of light, a chink in the aluminum skirting. He crawled to it and peered through. He could see a piece of the street and the door of Herb's prowl car. And it was opening.

Herb stepped out, eyeing the smoke leaking out around the trailer door. His mouth narrowed, then he reached into the car and grabbed his shotgun. He limped to the door and flattened himself against the wall only inches from where Travis lay.

Travis huddled in the darkness, afraid to breathe. There was a crunch as Herb jerked the door open, breaking the flimsy chain. "Travis? Dammit, what do you think you're doing?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Herb stalked back to his car, reached beneath the seat, and came up with a small automatic pistol. He shoved it in his belt and trotted clumsily back to the trailer.

The trailer rocked as Herb vaulted through the door. "Travis? You'd better show yourself and damned fast."

Trav could hear him coughing, blundering around. "Travis, come outta there, now!" Travis heard the snick of the shotgun, then a deafening roar as Herb began firing through the bathroom door.

The moment the gun went off, Trav kicked the flimsy aluminum skirting aside and sprinted for the wrecker. He freed the bull-winch cable, hooked it to the top of the door frame, then jerked the power-arm down, cranking the winch wide open.

The trailer shuddered as the cable snapped taut, then, inexorably, it began to tilt. Travis heard Herb shout something from within,

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but it was too late. With a groan, the winch pulled the trailer off its support blocks and it tipped over, crashing down on its face.

"It's a crock," Herb said, his voice muffled by the buckled trailer wall. "His whole story's a crock. I saw him breakin' in, he slugged me, then tipped the damn trailer over with me inside."

"What about this murder weapon he says you've got in there, Herb?" Nordstrom asked. He was kneeling next to the broken front window, talking to Herb through the iron grillwork. Falcone had Travis in cuffs, holding him a few feet away.

"Dammit, the gun's his," Herb said. "He used it on Canales, now he's trying to pin it on me."

"I haven't fired a gun since I got out of the army," Travis said quietly. "You can test me for that, can't you?"

"We can do a paraffin test, sure," Nordstrom said, "but it'd only be circumstantial. I admit I don't like the looks of this, Herb going in after you without reporting a crime or calling for backup, but it still comes down to your word against his."

"You're half right," Travis said. "It comes down to his word all right, but not against mine. It'll be against his own."

"How do you mean?"

"My father-in-law's English is pretty rocky, so he records all of his telephone calls to make sure he gets his messages straight. When Herb called there to threaten my wife, he was on tape. He used a phony accent to disguise his voice, but I imagine it'll be recognizable."

Nordstrom nodded. "A voiceprint's as good as a fingerprint. The accent won't make any difference. How about it, Herb? Does he have your voice on tape?"

There was a long silence. "I want a lawyer," Herb said at last. "I know my rights."

"Yeah," Nordstrom said coolly, "I expect you do. But I think I'll read 'em to you anyway, in case you've forgotten one or two. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

"How do we get him out of there?" Nordstrom asked Trav when he'd finished.

"I pulled the trailer over with the bull winch. If I shift the wrecker around, I can raise it the same way. But I can't very well do it wearin' handcuffs."

"What about the money?" Falcone asked as he fitted the key into the cuff lock. "Where is it? In the safe?"

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"No," Travis said, massaging his wrists. He knelt beside the window. "Herb, listen up. I want you to hear this. Your money was never here. It's back at my place, stashed in the doghouse. You walked right past it. You didn't have to shoot him, you know. Mutt was all bluff, he wouldn't have bothered you.

"But here's the thing. Maybe I would've taken your deal. God knows I really need the money and Canales was nothing to me. When I said I thought you did the world a favor, I meant it. So maybe I would've taken my cut and let you walk away with the rest, free as the breeze. If you hadn't shot my dog. I want you to think about that, all those long nights you spend in the slammer. I hope you dream about it."

He rose slowly and started toward the wrecker, but Falcone grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute. Are you saying you would've gone along with Sheriff Mackey, except for a dog?"

"Maybe. To be honest, I'm not sure. But Herb'll never know for sure either. And I kinda like that idea."

"But over a dog? I don't get it."

"I guess different people care about different things," Travis said. "Do you have a dog?"

"No."

"Well, neither do I," Trav said, climbing behind the wheel of the wrecker. "Not anymore."

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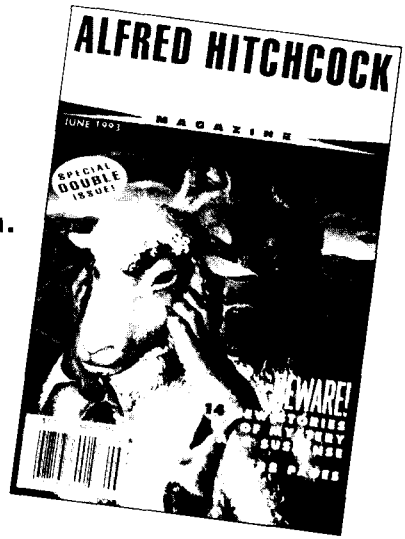

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